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A Romantic Novel of Rebellious Hearts

By CLEE WOODS

## GUN PARTNER

A Novelette of Trigger Nerve

By A. LESLIE

## RENEGADE RIDER

A Novelette of Outlaw Love

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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# THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XVI, No. 1 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* December, 1937

*COMPLETE ROMANTIC NOVEL*

**PRAIRIE PRINCESS**.....**Clee Woods** 14

*Nadine's Heart Faces a Stern Test of Courage and Steadfastness when Desperate Blood-Thirsty Range Grabbers Ride!*

*THREE COMPLETE NOVELETTES*

**RENEGADE RIDER**.....**Johnston McCulley** 52

*Romance Verges on Destruction when Sue Larcher Uses Wits and Guns to Stave Off a Threatened Cottonwood Shindig!*

**GUN PARTNER**.....**A. Leslie** 90

*Hell Busts Loose at Monument's Alhambra Saloon when Connie May, Gun-Totin' Range Girl, Takes Charge!*

**DEATH RIDES THE RIO BRAVO**.....**Robert E. Obets** 116

*Smoke Sloan, Owl-Hoot Hombre, Savvies Just One Brand of Revenge— Even When it Means Outlawin' Love!*

*THRILLING SHORT STORIES*

**OUTCAST**.....**Rolland Lynch** 68

*Ketti Galvin Signs Over Her Rights to the Man She Hates!*

**THE BOSS OF RIDGE VALLEY**.....**Tom Curry** 79

*Florrie Young Has a Leaden Solution to a Baffling Range Problem!*

**RUSTLERS' GAL**.....**Allan K. Echols** 107

*Stolen Cattle Are Forgotten as a Dance Hall Girl Corrals a Heart*

*SPECIAL FEATURES*

**BRANDING FIRE SONG BOOK**.....**"Tex" Brown** 88

*Words and Music of "Plantonio"*

**AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE**.....**A Department** 134

*Where the Editor, Readers and Club Members Meet*

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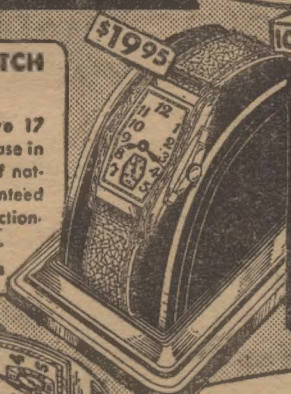

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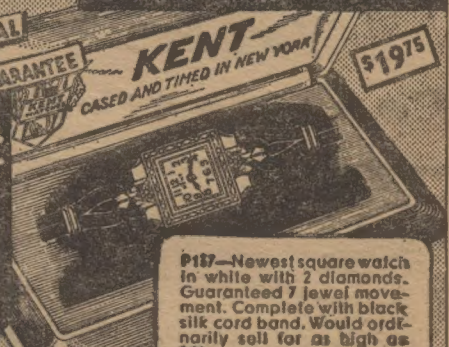


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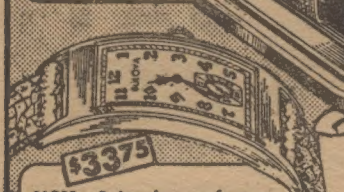

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Think of it — as little as 10c a day (paid monthly) will enable you to own one of these beautiful Diamonds or Watches. I'll send your choice of these bargains for approval and 10-day trial. Simply put a dollar bill in an envelope with your name, address and number of the article wanted. Tell me your age (must be over 20), occupation, employer and a few facts about yourself. Information held confidential — no direct inquiries will be made. I'll open a 10-month Charge Account for you and send selection for approval. If you are not satisfied, send it back and I'll refund your dollar. If satisfied, pay balance in 10 small monthly payments. Send your order today.

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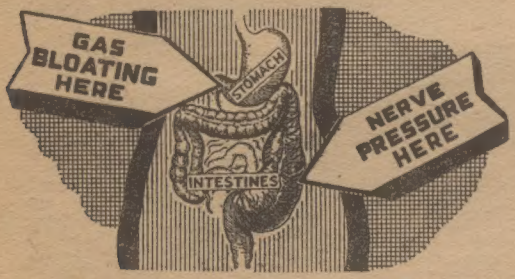


When you are constipated two things happen. FIRST: Wastes swell up the bowels and press on nerves in the digestive tract. This nerve pressure causes headaches, a dull, lazy feeling, bilious spells, loss of appetite and dizziness. SECOND: Partly digested food starts to decay forming GAS, bringing on sour stomach (acid indigestion), and heartburn, bloating you up until you sometimes gasp for breath.

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Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that permits Nature to close the opening—that holds the rupture securely but gently, day and night, at work and at play! Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for results beyond the expectation of the writers. What is this invention—How does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Automatic Air Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

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Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The Perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It brings heavenly comfort and security—while the Automatic Air Cushion continually works, in its own, unique way *to help Nature get results!* Learn what this patented invention can mean to you—send coupon quick!

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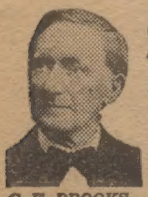

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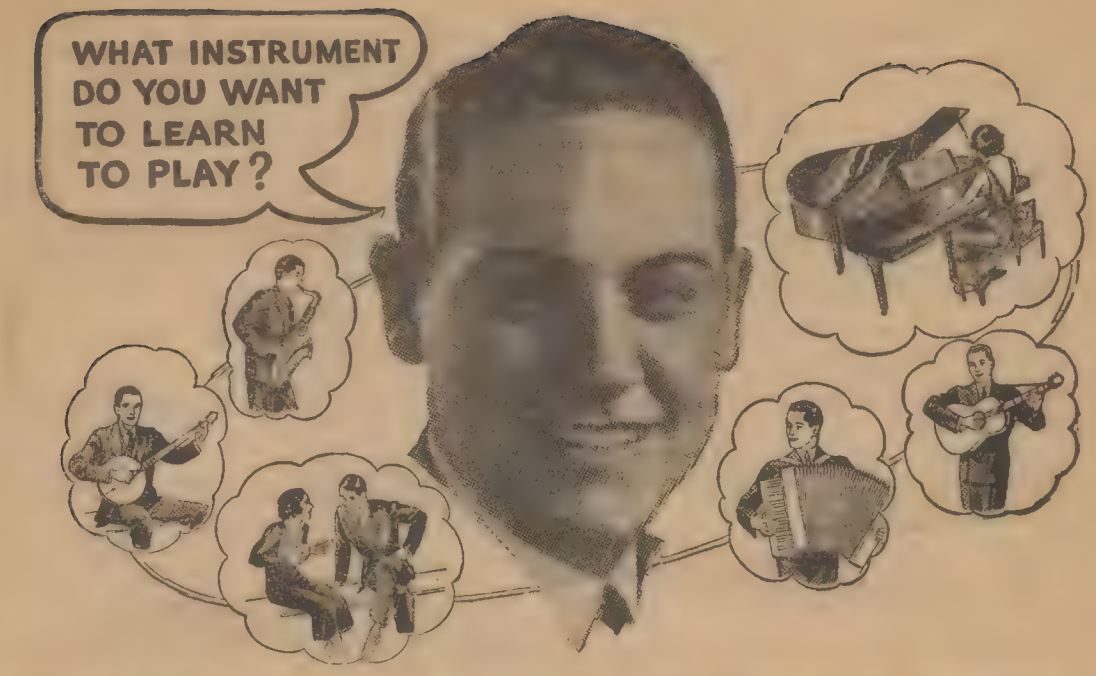


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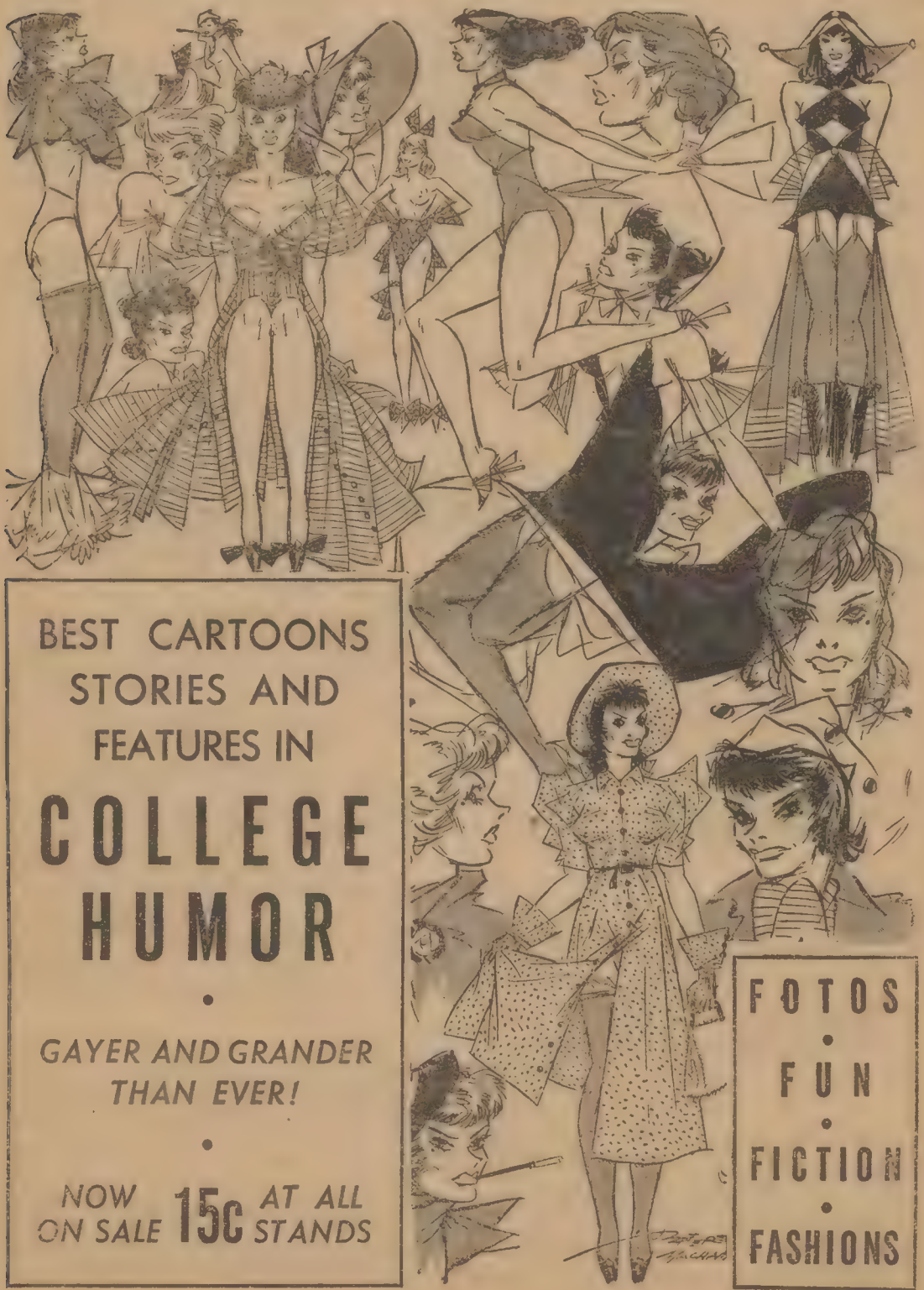

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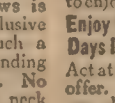

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# PRAIRIE

*He turned and saw Nadine blazing away*

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### CHAPTER I

*A Ride in the Night*

MIDNIGHT. A girl, small, slim, delicately curved, lay tossing on her bed, her long hair coal-black against the white pillow.

Sleep was impossible. For not one minute could she rid herself of the haunting fear that she was going to regret tomorrow all her life. But her father had asked her pointblank to do this one thing for him; and there had been the bare hint of tragedy in his voice.

Nadine sat up, the toss of her head showing a sudden determination as she slipped out of bed. Tiptoeing over to the closet she began hunting for riding breeches and

Nadine's Heart Faces A Stern Test When

# PRINCESS

*of Western Romance*

## WOODS

*"Outcast Guns," etc.*

boots. Hastily she slipped them on, and a boyish grey shirt. Her last move before she stole out to the corrals was to strap on a businesslike .38.

The white 'dobe ranchhouse that spread out U-shaped into two dozen rooms was full of wedding guests. For tomorrow Nadine was to marry J. Homer Woofter, the coming man of all this part of the Southwest, they said; Woofter, broad-shouldered, rangy, perhaps thirty-five, blond and grey-eyed, impressive-looking, and as ruthlessly ambitious as might be a man of his millions.

Nadine *had* to forget the whole thing right now, though, in a hard ride. Even the smell of corral dust and sweat-caked saddle blankets made her feel better as she slipped into the corral. Her sorrel, "Nub-

Blood-Thirsty Range Grabbers Ride!

bins," whinnied to her softly as she eased her saddle from the shed.

Out in the night pasture two bulls were challenging each other in ominous bellowings. A visitor's horse in a stall behind Nadine pawed his straw bedding uneasily. But through these sounds the girl suddenly made out the dull clump of stealthy boots. Then she smelled strong twist tobacco burning in a pipe. "Buck" Bacon, her father's foreman, smoked that kind.

Nadine shifted over against a snubbing post. Was she being followed? Or was somebody else wanting a horse?

By the light clinking of spurs she realized that two men were coming into the corral. Some of the horses kept in the corral for the night almost ran over Nadine as the two men caught mounts and saddled, every movement cautious. It all sounded like trouble of some sort to the watching girl, and she had been hearing rumblings of trouble on the range.

AS the two men led their horses out the gate she heard Buck Bacon's cautiously lowered voice say:

"If Kirk shows fight, it's the chance we've been working toward for weeks. This time we'll have him, shore as Gawd made little rattlesnakes!"

Quick fire shot through the girl. She knew whom they meant. Who didn't? Why, Sam Kirk was almost an outlaw these days, to most people. But the very tone of the men suggested that he was being framed.

Nadine, though, had gone to school with Sam Kirk. She knew how square he had been as a boy. She refused to believe he could have changed so.

Nadine wanted to know more, but the two hands had swung to their saddles. They were, she saw, two of her father's seven so-called "Peace Devils," famous for the way they kept peace on the range. But this didn't sound like peace talk.

An old fear chilled Nadine as instinct told her it might have something to do with this suspicious night ride. Her father, L. K. Graham, had ruled this corner of the Southwest with a heavy hand. His grip had started to weaken, until Homer Woofter had backed him up with his newspaper in Latigo City; with money, too, Nadine feared. And if now—

Abruptly she jerked out her gun, started to hurry after the two hands who were spurring away. Then all at once lightning seemed to strike. A heavy body came hurtling against Nadine. Powerful arms clutched her. She crashed to the ground with a man who had shot out from a fence corner, tearing her gun from her hand.

Terrified, she tried to scream, but a big hand clamped tightly over her mouth, then steely fingers had clamped on her throat, as the man planted a crushing knee hard onto her chest. Nadine's first horrified thought was that she was being kidnaped. Her father and bridegroom-to-be could raise a tempting ransom. Her father branded twenty-five thousand calves each year and Woofter was a millionaire. His little county paper was only a plaything.

The man held her helpless until he made sure the departing Peace Devils had not heard what little noise his attack had made. Nadine tried to beat her boots on the ground to attract attention, but the man gruffly said, "Stop it!" his voice rumbling deep in a powerful chest, and his very tone brought instant obedience.

"Now, sonny," he said, as the clatter of horses' hoofs died in the distance, "I'll ask yuh a few questions. Jest what's them damn Peace Devils up to? And why—"

His voice broke off sharply as his face bent nearer to hers. Then sud-

denly his fingers jerked from her throat. His knee fell away from her half crushed chest.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he stammered. "I thought yuh was some young cowhand. Don't yell, and I'll take my hand off yore mouth."

He did release her, and as he helped her sit up Nadine saw whose deep voice had spoken. Sam Kirk's!

"Nadine!" he exclaimed, in a husky, embarrassed whisper. "W-what *you* doin' out here? I thought yuh was gittin' married tomorrow."

"And that," retorted Nadine between gulps, "is why you came here? To strike at my Father while he thinks only of his daughter's marriage?"

"I didn't come here," he said, his voice cold and lifeless, "to explain anything to Homer Woofter's bride. But yuh kin go tell him I was here. That I'll be here agin, after he's done his worst."

SAM KIRK, Nadine remembered, always had a way of putting intense feeling into his voice. Pent-up rage was in it now—and something else. The quick thought came to Nadine that it was contempt for her! It stung her to the quick. Humiliation swept over her for just one second, then she crushed it beneath sudden anger at his daring so to think of her. Her hand flashed out, slapped him hard across the face.

The instant Nadine had done that, she wanted to run away. But she stood her ground; so did he. For tense moments both remained silent, but passions were running riot. Nadine had known how Kirk hated her father. And she knew now how he hated Homer Woofter.

All at once he turned away without a word, and disappeared into the night. Nadine went back beneath the great cottonwoods that lined the lane to the ranchhouse, her thoughts a turmoil. She had set herself against Sam Kirk just now, and she had intended taking his part, even up to the moment he had come driving out of the darkness to engulf her in those terrible arms. She was certain she would be black and blue; hoped in a fleeting way, that Kirk's fingerprints would not show on her throat above the lace of her wedding gown.

Plainly enough she realized that somebody had elected to start trouble on her wedding day—when it would be least expected. Was it Sam Kirk? But Nadine couldn't forget the talk of the two Peace Devils. Why, Buck Bacon had even said they had been working toward Kirk's destruction for weeks. And they had ridden off with no idea Kirk was so near. Where? And for what?

Nadine's anger toward Sam Kirk quickly cooled. She couldn't help believing in his uprightness. He ought to be warned, if any plot were brewing against him. But then, too, she ought to tell her father of his midnight visit here, if Kirk should have any plot afoot.

Torn between the two thoughts, Nadine went back to her room and by the dim moonlight scribbled a note to her mother. It read:

I'll be back in time to dress for the ceremony.

She smiled as she finished it, hearing Governor Drayson snoring in the next room. The state's chief executive and his lady had honored the wedding with their presence.

Nadine hurried back to the corral and found her lost .38 after a quick search. Mounting the saddled and waiting Nubbins she trotted off toward the mountains where Sam Kirk's modest ranch lay in defiance of L. K. Graham's constant demand for more grass. Where the trails converged into a canyon five miles from her home, Nadine got down and lit one of the handful of matches she had brought with her, to examine the sign.

In the earth made soft by two days

of recent rains, she made out that one horse had come out of the canyon that night. But many had gone back into it, and the tracks toeing mountainward were much fresher. She knew, too, by the marks of the horses' hoofs that her father's horses had made those tracks toward Kirk's place.

An old blacksmith from Montana years ago had persuaded L. K. Graham to use the nipplelike "never-slip" calks that screwed into the shoes.

One set of tracks down and back had been made by horseshoes with the common hammered calks. That would be Sam Kirk's. But at least eight of her father's Saddle B riders had followed him back to his ranch.

Nadine couldn't turn back now. And suddenly she felt a wild delight, with the wind in her face from up the canyon and the weird yap of coyotes on the jagged point above. Men ahead hunting trouble—and for this hour, at least, she was free!

## CHAPTER II

### *Cornered*

NADINE lost her way in the night. By the time she got back on the trail day was breaking, grey and heavy. Soon a hard rain set in.

But she went determinedly on. She struck a low rimrock; pushed along it. She heard the bawl of round-up cattle on the move and realized that, in spite of the increasing downpour, Sam Kirk's herd was being pushed for the Apache Pass.

From beside a mountain mahogany bush growing in a crevice of the rimrock Nadine looked down through the rain. There they went, a thousand or more beef steers, fat on mountain grass. Old Ed Taylor, Kirk's staunchest friend, was at the point, beating his gum slicker with one hand and yelling, *"Hi-i-i-up! Hi-i-i-up!"*

Three cowboys were on the flanks, and two more were whacking the rumps of the drags. Behind them old "Brown John," burly bull cook, sat stolidly on the chuckwagon seat.

Dropping down through a break in the rimrock Nadine hurried ahead of the outfit, carefully studying every brand on the wet, steaming ribs of the fat steers. Circle N S, every one. Not a brand had been burned, and a burned brand on sleek stuff like this beef herd would be plain.

Honest enough, this drive, nor was there any suggestion of trouble. But Sam Kirk himself was missing. Why wasn't he with his outfit?

Nadine had ridden on past the herd for half a mile when suddenly she jerked Nubbins to a halt. The crack of a rifle broke from down in the canyon, then other rifles joined in angry gun talk.

Nadine rushed Nubbins over the hoof-trampled trail until she came in sight of Kirk's three-room log house. Eight men had formed a tight circle about the little house, their rifles lined over rocks and logs.

Peace Devils indeed! Nadine saw red. Something in her impetuous nature had always forced her sympathy to the underdog of any fight, and this was eight against one!

Nadine had always believed that the Peace Devils maintained law on the range and were justified in their severity in dealing with rustlers and badmen. Here, though, was an entirely different story, unless Sam Kirk suddenly had turned out far worse than she could ever imagine!

As she watched the ambushers, another man, Hense Sobell—she recognized the little man by his harelip and his scrawny blond mustache—appeared much nearer her. She thought he had seen her and was coming to remonstrate, but instead he turned up the steep ridge behind

the Kirk house, sneaking along. Nadine sensed some trick, but decided to do nothing until she saw what Sobell meant to do.

Following him through the piñons, afoot, she saw him creep in behind a manzanita bush on the ridge three hundred yards from the house. He sat down, leveled a rifle at a small heap of brush. Strange, when the fight was at the house, not here.

Then smoke lifted from the house and Nadine's heart clutched. They had set Sam Kirk's house afire—were going to shoot him down as he came out! But why was Sobell here—watching that brushpile as a cat would a mouse hole? Nadine couldn't wait to find out. She went running for him.

"SOBELL," she demanded of the startled man, "what are you doing this for?"

He muttered something she could not understand, glowering. Nadine ran over and saw the mouth of an old mining cross-cut concealed behind the brushpile.

"Did Dad tell you to do this?" she asked, her tone implying that what Sobell was doing must be all right.

"No, Woofter," Sobell said, in his hardly understandable speech. "It's the shorest way to git Kirk without losin' men. That there cross-cut leads to a tunnel, Miss Nadine. Sam Kirk's pa built his house up aginst that tunnel mouth at the end of the ridge yonder. He thought nobody remembered the old mine. But yore pa never forgot it. Sam Kirk'll shore come outa this tunnel, and—"

The harelipped man suddenly gaped. Nadine had a .38 muzzle in his face.

"It would be murder!" she snapped. "Give me that rifle!" She snatched the weapon from the surprised man's hands. "Now back up to this juniper and put your hands around the trunk."

Sobell obeyed, with a shrug. Nadine's eyes looked as businesslike as her pointing .38.

She snatched off her belt, secured his hands, then ran into the tunnel. She tried to scratch matches, to find her way along the hard tunnel, but they were too wet. She groped on, anyway.

She came out of the tunnel against a thick door. A light through a crack told her that the Kirk house had been set flush in against the tunnel mouth. She heard the boom of a rifle as she eased through the door, to find herself in a sort of closet. And through a crack in that closet door she beheld a sight she would never forget.

Sam Kirk might have been fighting for the sheer love of it. Smoke and powder grime mingled with sweat on his cheek where again and again his Winchester flashed against it. A log house burns slowly, but the roof of this one was almost ready to fall in. Yet Kirk fought on—and surely he must know of the tunnel by which he could escape.

His face was bitter, but it was a face in which were rare strength and intelligence. In his lustrous brown eyes was a deep, burning fire—the eyes of a man too free and wild ever to be wholly tamed. In the thickness of one black eyebrow was a knife scar. Nadine had heard that he had two bullet wounds in his breast, too.

*Pow-ow-ow!* His rifle crashed defiance once more. The head of a Peace Devil jerked back from the window as the man fell to the ground.

"I reckon Homer Woofter'll tell how a noble Peace Devil got murdered in the mountains, eh?" Kirk yelled derisively, withering sarcasm in his cry.

Nadine felt that she *must* stop this fight—now! But what would Sam Kirk say about her interference!

Smoke was boiling down through the gunny-sack ceiling. A flame burst through and licked at a greasy

old Stetson and a gun holster that Nadine knew belonged to Kirk's father. As he grabbed hat and holster from the wall she realized that at last he was taking leave of his doomed home. She ducked back into the closet, saw him pause as he noticed the door ajar.

"Anybody in there, yuh better come out with yore paws buzzard-ward!" he snapped.

Nadine did not want him to know she had come to help him. She would, she vowed, remain loyal to her dad until the end of time. She had interfered now only because of her stubbornness about giving every man his chance.

She started to slip away into the blackness of the tunnel. Kirk's rifle roared. The bullet hit the wall beside her. She crouched, went on running as he fired again. This time his bullet was considerably above her. She rushed on with all the speed she could.

The tunnel took a turn shortly and she leaped up, racing as fast as she dared in the darkness. She heard him coming on, though. But perhaps he had decided he'd been mistaken about somebody's being in the tunnel.

Nadine ran on past where faint light showed from the cross-cut, hugging the floor of the tunnel twenty yards beyond. Then Kirk hit the light, turned out, and she took her first easy breath for minutes.

She followed him out as soon as she dared, saw him start for her horse, then whirl and stare at Sobell, tied to the juniper.

"What kind of a trick is this?" he demanded of the harelipped man. "Who tied you up here?"

Nadine didn't want Sobell to answer.

And there was only one way to stop him, though, so whipping up her six-shooter she ripped a bullet through the air in front of Kirk. She had barely time to see him whirling back toward the mouth of the cross-cut, Winchester ready, before she ducked out of sight. She retreated into the darkness, waiting breathlessly.

He was not foolhardy enough to venture into the cross-cut from which had come a hostile shot. Nor did Nadine have the temerity to steal out, for several minutes. Then she peered out through the brush and saw Sam Kirk on one of the horses the Peace Devils had tied to the juniper and piñon before beginning their attack. And he had turned loose the rest of the mounts!

"Hey, sweet angels!" he shouted, as he spurred his mount. "Yuh better fly away home to the Saddle B. That's where I'm headin'! But if any of yuh can't fly with a little lead in yore carcass, yuh better go a little careful!" Whooping, he struck down the trail.

Nadine did not believe he meant to go to the Saddle B. Probably he only wanted to draw these raiders away from his beef herd, up the canyon two or three miles. But wherever he might be going, she had to head for home. She would be late for her own wedding if she waited to find out anything more.

## CHAPTER III

### *Gun Guest*

IT was a weary, bedraggled girl who showed up at home hours later and announced she was ready to put on her wedding gown. A hundred guests were already on hand; the elite of the Southwest cattle world and its foremost cities.

The women guests had been enjoying the jitters for hours, speculaton the cause of the bride's absence. Some of the men had begun to shake their heads gravely.

Nadine's mother hugged the girl's

wet body to her and drew her into her room.

"What's wrong, child?" she asked, almost as calm as Nadine herself. "Don't you want to go through with it?"

Nadine hesitated. Mother *had* guessed something then. But her dad—

"Oh, yes, I want to go through with it," she declared. "But I—I just had to get away for a ride. My last one, my own free self. Let's get the duds on. How did Homer take it —my being gone?"

"He kept vowing Sam Kirk had kidnaped you. He said otherwise you would never take a chance on losing him for a husband."

"*Wouldn't* I?" Nadine stiffened in her wet clothes.

But her little spasm of rebellion was speedily over. Elena, their Mexican maid, helped her strip off wet boots, breeches, shirt and undergarments. Elena patted the bride's lovely white shoulder and shook her head.

"Eet begeen to draw up, you been een rain so long," she deplored. "Why you run away, senorita?"

The maid's black eyes were glistening with a romantic suspicion. But Nadine made no answer. She was soon busy with warm water and soap and powders to offset the shriveling effect of the rain on her skin.

READY at last, Nadine asked for a few minutes alone in her room. She felt as if she were on the brink of the precipice, before a suicidal leap. A few moments alone might give her needed courage.

As she stood alone, thoughts heavy, something darkened her window ever so little. She whirled, sped for her six-shooter that lay on the mantel and ran to the window.

"Stop!"

Her low command carried through the rain to a man who whirled, faced her. Sam Kirk! She did not see how bedraggled were the clothes covering his rugged six-foot frame as she saw the dull, smoldering fire in his brown eyes. Ignoring the six-shooter in her hand those lustrous eyes ran over her wedding gown and filmy veil.

Lovely as Nadine always was, she was lovelier now than she had ever been in her life. The mistiness in her blue eyes only intensified the unawakened womanhood deep within her soul. As if in unconscious tribute to her beauty, Kirk slowly took off his old grey Stetson with its peaked front and flat, dented crown.

"What're you doing here?" Nadine demanded angrily.

She had a right to be angry, she thought. Coming back here like this, determined to carry on a fight on her wedding day!

For a moment she thought he started to speak, perhaps to tell her his side of the story. Then the lines of his face tautened. She knew he was remembering she was ready to marry Homer Woofter, the man who had published some bitter articles against Sam Kirk—had, in fact, made him out a common outlaw, while praising the Peace Devils until it might have been thought they were saddle gods.

"What's it to yuh?" Kirk said sullenly, and the girl's lips tightened.

"I'll give you a chance to clear out of here," she told him. "Get going!"

Kirk hesitated. His eyes compelled her blue ones to meet them in some unspoken, almost hungry understanding.

Abruptly he started to turn away, then stopped short. "I've got to tell yuh this much, Nadine," he said hurriedly. "I knew trouble was in the air. And I didn't want it to come. I'd heard Governor Drayson was to be at—at the weddin'. I wanted to see him, to tell him my side of this thing. No law officer in these parts'll

listen to me against yore dad with all his *dinero*. So I figgered I'd save trouble by comin' to see the governor at night."

*Nadine*

"I'm glad you've told me that, Sam," Nadine said frankly.

"But," he went on, "when I got back near home this mornin', the Saddle B riders jumped me. To keep 'em away from my beef herd, I ducked back to my house. I'll be broke if I don't get my steers to the shippin' pens. The Saddle B gang burned my house to git me. I give 'em the slip and—and I'm still hopin' the governor'll have some sense of right and wrong. If he don't, well, Nadine, yuh're liable to be a widow mighty early."

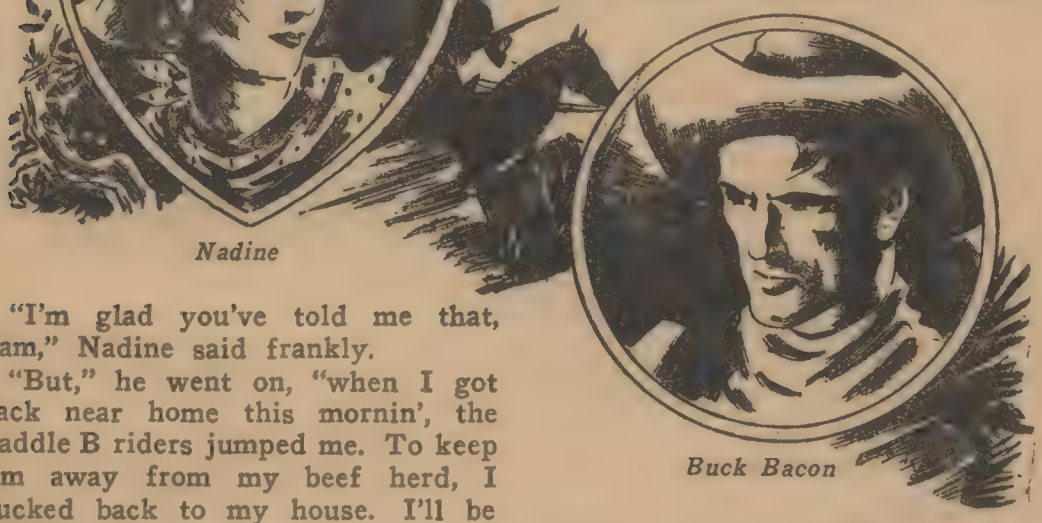
Without another word Sam Kirk strode on for the back door of the governor's room, one of the rows of rooms spread along the full width of the great 'dobe structure. From open windows Nadine heard low exclamations, whispers, hushed warnings from some of the guests who recognized Kirk. From what they had read most of them looked upon him as a veritable gun demon. And apparently they believed he must be on the rampage.

"Hey, L. K.," one man called in subdued voice, "if you have any fighters around, get 'em busy. That outlaw Kirk's outside!"

Kirk! That name meant something to L. K. Graham. Kirk's father had been a thorn in Graham's side. A stubborn, relentless fighter, but too fair for his own good.

His herd had gone downhill while Graham's had grown consistently greater and greater.

Kirk dropped his hat and yanked his father's notched six-shooter from his breeches waistband, to have a



*Buck Bacon*

gun in each hand. Then he burst open the door of the honored guests' room. Nadine swiftly followed him. That was plainly her duty, with Kirk in such a mood.

Mrs. Drayson and her daughter, Mary, both in terrified awe of the two-gun intruder, were in the room, but no governor.

The dripping-wet Kirk strode into the next room. Nobody there. Kirk knew he had got himself into a tight place. Billy the Kid hardly could have stirred up a greater rumpus. And L. K. Graham would soon have enough fighting cowboys on hand to make it hard for Kirk to get away.

As Kirk stalked into the third room from which three women already had fled, men with guns were running along the front porch. Nadine heard her father bellowing commands; heard the low voice of Homer Woofter, giving orders.

"Sam," Nadine implored, terror in

her blue eyes, "don't you see this is too dangerous for you?"

"I got to show the governor," Kirk said grimly, "how yore Dad and yore husband-to-be have hounded me nearly to death—that their main reason for it is plain old greed for grass. Dozens of little fellers have been run off—robbed or some of 'em even killed by them precious Peace Devils! That's what I'm walkin' into, too, I reckon, unless Governor Drayson takes a hand."

The cowboy's eyes were aflame with feeling; and intense honesty. He was no desperado, Nadine thought quickly. No man who didn't feel as if his cause was just could have come here like this to lay his case before the state's chief executive. Into the girl's eyes there came a sympathetic flash, then quick decision came to her.

"Stay here!" she begged. "I'll try to get Governor Drayson to give you a few minutes, anyway."

*Woofter*

*Kirk*

She darted out the front door, called quickly to the executive who was talking with her father:

"Governor Drayson, Sam Kirk wants to talk to *you*. It can't do any harm, anyway."

Nadine's father was on crutches because of a horse's fall. He was a medium-built man, turning grey, with deep lines about his large mouth. With strength and stubbornness written on each feature he looked far more fit to rule a state than thin, spare, white-haired Governor Drayson who stood beside him in the rain.

"Why, Nady," Graham exclaimed, "you must be crazy! Kirk might shoot the governor down."

"What good could it do for me to talk to a killer?" Drayson interposed.

"Never mind, Nadine!" came Sam Kirk's deep voice from the doorway. "I see how useless it was for me to hope for any justice—'cept Colonel Colt's kind. Thank yuh, jest the same."

Hard on his words came a heavy tramp of boots. J. Homer Woofter strode out of the big living room with four Saddle B devils at his back.

"Kirk," he cried, "you were outlaw enough to take advantage of a day like this to come here and make trouble. Now, I—"

"You were low enough," Kirk cut in, "to send out Saddle B raiders against me, on a day when yuh thought nobody would accuse yuh of it! Low enough to plot murder—instead of thinkin' of yore bride!"

"Let him have it, men!" Woofter cried.

The four Peace Devils swung swift hands for gun-butts. Kirk dodged

back into the room, scurried to the back door, gun in his hand. But four men were waiting for him, one with a sawed-off shotgun.

Nadine was at his shoulder, deep terror in her eyes. She thrust a hand onto Kirk's arm.

"You'll only sell your life out there in that rain and mud," she said, voice low, pleading. "That would be so useless, Sam. Wait, I'll—"

She ran onto the front porch. "Dad," she cried, "Kirk came here to talk peace. All he gets is surrounded by guns. Shame on you! Shame on Homer! Shame on Governor Drayson!"

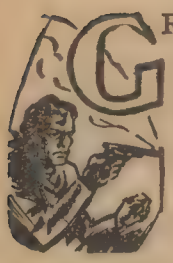
Even Nadine did not know how she made those words burn and sting as she spoke them with head lifted high in feminine challenge, yet with blue eyes that blazed a man's defiance.

"Let Kirk go free as he came!" she dared. "Isn't this a day to be generous? Homer, do you think more of murder than you do of your bride?"

"All right, let 'im go this time," Graham said, with a shrug. "But if he ever shows up here again—"

## CHAPTER IV

### *Stolen Bride*



GRUDGINGLY, Woofter called off his gun-fighters and as Nadine disappeared he pretended to go sullenly to his room. But actually he entered Mrs. Drayson's room where he hurriedly rummaged through drawers.

Finding Mrs. Drayson's pocketbook he left hastily with it hidden under his coat. Nadine slipped around to the last room in the rear of the house and saw Sam Kirk on his way out, the Saddle B fighters watching him sullenly.

Dropping his Colt into its holster, Kirk stalked by the room in which Nadine waited and turned the corner, out of sight of his enemies.

"Sam!" He stopped short as he heard Nadine's whisper. She had her head out a window. "I'm running away with you!" she said sibilantly.

Kirk stood as if paralyzed by the unbelievable statement. But Nadine was already crawling out the window, her heart in wild chaos. She wasn't sure herself whether or not she had gone crazy. What a thing to do! Turn against her dad! Run out on him! But the sturdy cowboy there before her gave her some reassurance. He looked so strong—so comforting.

"I can't stand it—to marry Homer!" she burst out. "I would have gone through with it, for Dad's sake. But I can't now."

She slid deftly out the window, but as she dropped to the ground, pain shot across her face.

"Where's your horse?" she asked.

"Back yonder behind that salt-cedar hedge."

She started to walk, but half fell. She had turned an ankle in dropping from the window. Kirk sprang to her.

"Yuh—yuh mean it?" he stammered.

"I do mean it—as I never meant anything in my life before! Just help me get to a train. I'll never come back!"

A tremble was in her voice as she made that avowal. Going away forever was a bitter thought. Love of these mountains and rivers and mesas was in her blood.

"Shore, I'll help yuh," Kirk agreed quickly, and before she was aware of his intent, he had scooped her up into his arms and was running hard through the muddy orchard. He knew, as well as Nadine knew, that it wouldn't be long before a whole pack would come raging down after them.

For a bare moment Nadine gave

*Nadine leaped to the window and cried "Stop!"*

way to the glory of the madness of the thing. She was a rebel—a runaway; an ally of this reckless young fighting cowboy who crushed her so hard in his powerful arms.

He cast one glance downward at her. Never had Nadine seen such fire in a man's eyes. He, too, must be filled with madness. And rebel she was, right then she exulted in it, gloried in the wonder of having stirred a man like this to such depths.

Reality came back at the first loud cry of alarm from the house. Their flight was discovered! Other cries echoed, then she heard Woofter's voice

"Hurry, for God's sake!" he was shouting. "He's kidnaping Nadine!"

Nadine tried to fling herself from Kirk's arms. He gripped her tighter.

"I can't let them think that!" she cried. "They'll lynch you if they think you're kidnaping me!"

"I'm not leavin' yuh to Woofter," Kirk vowed, "no matter if they burn me alive!"

That quick, hot avowal hushed Nadine for a moment. Suddenly she felt afraid, as if she had been guilty of something she could not explain. Behind the cries became a veritable bedlam.

Then Nadine said, "Of course you couldn't leave me. That would not

be like you. But I'll set them right about this kidnaping, as soon as I'm on a horse."

Reaching his horse Kirk flung her onto the wet saddle, sprang up behind her and headed for the mountains. He took a battered old Stetson from the saddle-horn, put it on as he rode.

"It's my Dad's old Stetson," he said simply. "His forty-five, too. With them along, I sorter feel more like I'm not plumb loco to tear into Woofter and L. K. Graham like this. One of the Peace Devils shot Dad from the saddle jest four months ago."

Their retreat was being cut off. On the hard road and with less burdened horses, six men outrode him. Kirk turned north but was cut off again by more pursuers. Nadine could plainly see that everybody believed he was carrying her off against her will.

"WE got to try the river," Kirk said grimly.

"But a horse can walk the swinging footbridge blindfolded," she seconded.

The river was raging. Water had backed in behind the approaches as their horse splashed through it. Woofter and his devils were less than two hundred yards behind. Kirk jerked out the saddle blanket. Nadine, in front of him, bent over and covered the horse's eyes. Kirk forced the mount onto the footbridge.

The high comb of the river was lapping at the bridge and the weight of horse and double burden sank the bridge into the water. Nadine thought it was going to be taken out but Kirk spurred the snorting horse and in breathless moments they made it to the far side.

"I'm goin' to stand 'em off here till the bridge goes out," Sam Kirk said firmly.

"Got an extra gun?" Nadine asked.

"Nope—not for you. I aim for 'em to keep right on thinkin' I've kidnaped you."

"But you mustn't do that!"

"I'm goin' to. I know it nearly kills you to go against yore Dad. I don't want yuh to break with him forever. And I'll soon kill Woofter, so yuh kin go back home and—"

"But that would leave you a kidnaper and—"

"I'm branded heaps worse."

He yanked her from the saddle, quickly lashed her to a cottonwood tree, on the far side from the pursuers. Then he snatched his Winchester from saddle-boot.

"Sam," Nadine pleaded, "you know that no one on earth can hold that bridge against so many!"

He looked at her swiftly. There seemed an eternity of feeling in that look.

"Ever stop to think what my ranch brand stands for?" he asked.

"No, what?"

"The Circle N S. N for Nadine. S for Sam. Circle off to theirselves. It's been that way in my mind ever since yuh kept 'em from expellin' me from school once. You, me, a little ranch—and heaven. But in dreams only. I never looked for it to come true. Least of all, not jest now."

They might have been a thousand miles from enemy guns, for all he seemed to think of danger. Yet both could hear the shouts and Woofter roaring orders just across the river. For agonizing seconds they looked into each other's eyes—into each other's very souls. Then tears broke from Nadine's eyes and trickled down to mingle with the splash of rain on her cheeks.

"Sam," she whispered softly, "you wouldn't talk like that if you didn't think that you were going to die the next minute."

"Yes, I reckon mebbe they will rush me," Kirk said matter-of-factly. "Likely git me, too. But I've made up my mind on two things before

I'm cut down. I'll rid you of Woofter before the rest get me."

"And the other, Sam?"

Nadine was tender, strangely anguished. No more vain pleading with him to dodge the fight; no hysteria. He hesitated a moment, as a man might before leaping over a precipice. Suddenly, he stepped nearer, clutched hands onto her shoulders. Nadine had that strange intuitive certainty that comes to a girl before a lover commits himself in word or act. But she didn't want to stop him. His lips were moving towards hers, as if the whole world had concentrated on such an end. Then suddenly they were crushed against her lips—so hard that her head was forced back against the tree. And panic swept Nadine's heart as she realized she was giving him kiss for kiss!

It was all over as quickly as it had begun. He tore his hands away from her shoulders, broke away on the run, like a thief leaving without his loot. Nadine felt more guilty than ever. She had goaded him to this—when it could never mean anything to him or her.

ALL at once he spun around and came back. He laughed in her face, harsh and mockingly.

"Forgive me, girl," he asked. "It was shore mighty fine of yuh. Yuh know I'm a goner and it's like yuh to let a young fool pass out happy."

A Winchester rifle ball, raking hot beneath his chin, brought him back to reality. He went running back to the end of the bridge. Woofter and a bunch of men already were at the other end. One man was trying to force his unblinded horse onto the bridge. Three men whistled bullets at Kirk as he plunged in behind the big cottonwood to which the cables were anchored.

A bullet ripped off bark just above his head. Others struck the tree and whined into the air, like angry, disappointed hornets. Nobody was trying the crossing yet. They seemed to think it better to get Kirk first.

But minutes lenghtened out, and still Sam Kirk was holding them back. The water kept tugging harder at the bridge. They had to risk a crossing. Woofter prepared for it with military thoroughness. His cowboys and some of the men guests kept wading out to their end of the bridge, until he had twenty-odd men. Nadine saw her father come dashing down, pushing his horse across to Woofter's knot of men.

Woofter was placing his men flat in the mud where they could lay down a covering barrage on Sam Kirk's tree. With the pursuers was Nadine's sixteen-year-old brother, Buddy. But she could see that he held back, as if unwilling to join in the active fight.

Woofter ordered five men onto the bridge end. Four of them were Peace Devils, men famous for gun daring; hard fighters. Little, harelipped Hense Sobell, slayer of eleven men, was among them; blocky pock-faced Garnett; big Buck Bacon, dressed like a range dude but with five gun notches; and the Harkhorn brothers, boys in years but gun-wise and without consciences. All ready to charge over the footbridge.

"Don't try to stop them, Sam!" Nadine cried above the roar of the river and the spatter of rain.

But she saw him making ready to fight, notwithstanding her plea. He could escape no other way, and she knew he still meant to take her with him even though they had only one horse between them.

Before a move had been made three more men came galloping from the ranchhouse.

"That dirty outlaw stole Mrs. Drayson's pocketbook while he was in her room!" one of them boomed. "Three hundred dollars and a diamond ring."

Nadine refused to believe that.

She saw Kirk's lips move, as if emitting a hard oath. Of course, she thought instantly, some sneak thief had taken advantage of the excitement to make way with that pocketbook.

That accusation seemed to be the last urging needed as the men on the farther bank got grimly set for the charge. Nadine saw Kirk peer around his tree and immediately three rifles cracked simultaneously.

Then the pursuers were on their way! Five men running along the footbridge. Nadine approved Kirk's strategy in holding his sheltered position. Better to let them get halfway over, at least. Then those rifles at the other end would be blocked by the bodies of the chargers.

It was then that Kirk decided the moment had come to pick Woofter off. Over and over in his head kept lashing that one thought: "Get Woofter! Get Woofter!"

HE heard the beat of boots, saw the splash of water in midstream. His eyes on the upstream cable that supported the bridge footboards, suddenly he ripped one .30-30 ball after another into it. Then, with a flashing move, he whipped his Winchester sight onto the far bank, hunting for Woofter. He swore again when Woofter's head barely showed over a bank. Kirk tried to trigger on it hastily but missed. At the moment enemy guns roared and a ball cut between Kirk's ear and the tree bark.

Then a wild cry seemed to bring everything to a stop. The bridge was going out! The combined weight and swing of so many running men had been too much for a cable weakened by Sam Kirk's bullets. The cable popped! Four of the five charging men on the footbridge grasped the upper cable and clung on. The fifth was swept downstream until his agonized cry for help was silenced by the roaring water.

Sam Kirk crouched behind his tree, lips tight, eyes glowing. Safe for the moment! The raging river was between him and the men who would like to be his immediate executioners. A few hardy souls might try to swim horses across the river, but Kirk knew he could pick off half a dozen before a party could land near him.

But as he waited to see what they would do, a painful realization swept over him. He had to go back and face Nadine! And after that mad kiss, how could he do it? She was so utterly beyond him, a rich cowman's daughter; educated. And his enemy by lifelong tradition.

Threats were being shouted at Kirk from across the river, promises of death by the noose, the gallows. Finally Nadine's father came to the river's edge and began to plead with Kirk to let his daughter loose.

"I'll make any settlement yuh name!" he shouted over the roaring river. "The whole Bear Canyon range is yores, if—"

"And yuh wouldn't keep yore word ten minutes after yuh had Nadine back!" Kirk shouted back.

"Listen, Sam," Nadine flared up, "you may accuse Dad of many hard things, perhaps, but never of breaking his word."

"All right," Kirk instantly yelled to Graham, "I'll turn her loose on jest one condition. Let Woofter step out on the bank, where nobody else kin reach us, and shoot it out with me across the river!"

Somehow the realization that Sam's hatred was centered only on Woofter made Nadine glad. When Woofter forwith made a show of accepting the challenge it surprised the girl who was to have been his bride. But Homer Woofter's men laid detaining hands on him and Graham bluntly refused the offer.

"Sam," called Nadine, "come here."

Kirk crawled along the bank, got down low in the eddying water un-

til he reached her. His face went a painful red when he met her direct gaze.

"Hadn't you better ask me," she said determinedly, "before you talk of surrendering me!"

She could not miss the sudden eager delight in his face. Nadine—setting herself up as his partner in a fight which might only have a tragic end.

It was a long minute before he nodded and said: "Where would yuh like for me to take yuh?"

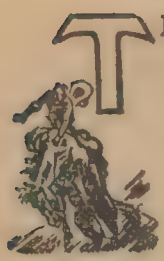
"I'm going with you—wherever you go," she said softly. "I've put you in a bad hole, Sam, and I want to see with my own eyes if Dad's men are doing what you say. If they are, then I'm seeing this fight through—before I go away forever."

"But I've got only a chuckwagon left to go back to!" he protested. "And they'll be certain to head for it soon as we leave here. I won't take yuh into such—"

"You're not taking me," Nadine said. "I'm going!"

## CHAPTER V

### *Chuckwagon Chills*



THE rain had let up, but the creek was still full to its banks hours after Nadine and Sam Kirk had left it. Now Nadine sat on a fresh horse in the junipers on a ridge point, watching the range behind her. A whole band of Saddle B riders were coming. Nadine counted as they passed a tree streaked by lightning. Twenty-six horsemen, with Woofter at their head. Her lamed father was not along.

She hurried down to where Brown John was busy kneading biscuits. Cowboys were dumping bedrolls out of the wagon, looking for high spots on which to spread them. Old Ed Taylor was just pulling in with a dead pine log, his rope tied to saddle-horn and log. His faded grey eyes squinted at Nadine with frank suspicion.

"They're coming," Nadine announced.

In her heart was a feeling of guilt that would have put Ed Taylor's evident distrust to flight instantly had he been able to know it. She had been disloyal to the father she loved. She could not quite put that feeling from her though she had not turned against him, but against the men who had burned the humble cabin of a weaker rival. The same men who were coming to continue their raids.

She saw Sam Kirk's jaw clamp at her announcement.

"Boys," he said, "I reckon yuh all know what it means. If anybody here don't want to fight, he better hightail right now."

Ed Taylor snorted. But there was something like fright in the eyes of one of the extra hands. It was plenty serious to buck L. K. Graham and Homer Woofter.

"Bill," Kirk said to this man, "yuh got a sick dad to support. I reckon yuh better ride on and tell the buyer I might roll in late with my beef stuff."

Nodding, the man turned his horse toward the entrance to the rock-walled canyon. But he was shame-faced, with the knowledge that he would be forever branded a quitter. From the canyon the bawls of cattle echoed. No guard was on just now. Precipitous cliffs held the herd on one side, and a swollen creek guarded them on the other.

"And you," Kirk told Nadine, "get in the wagon and cover up. They'll likely bluster a spell before they start smokin' us up."

Nadine climbed into the chuckwagon thoughtfully. Her turned ankle made her favor it a little yet, but it was not sprained. She had thrown away her bridal veil, but she

still wore the white silk gown, a snagged and mud-stained remnant of its former beauty.

"What are you going to do, Sam?" Nadine demanded, pausing with one soiled satin slipper on the wagon spoke.

"There's only one thing left to do, when they force it on us."

"Fight and die?" the girl murmured, blue eyes pain-racked. "You mustn't! Listen, Sam! There's a better way! Get in here with me. Let your men show surprise when Woofter shows up and asks for you."

"What good'll that do?"

"Maybe save your neck from the noose. Anyway, it'll be time enough to fight if you can't do anything else. Will you try my way first?" Her voice was pleading.

"Hey, Sam," interceded Brown John, the only man of the outfit who had not been unwilling to accept this enemy girl at her face value, "thar *is* heaps o' sense in not kickin' till yuh're spurred."

KIRK smiled. He was glad to see Brown John liked and trusted Nadine. Grimly he crawled into the covered wagon, let Brown John spread a tarp over him and Nadine. But he shaped a corner of it so they could look out, and he kept his six-shooter ready.

Again Nadine felt that wild, outlaw thing raging in his heart. Their cramped positions brought them close together. She could feel the pressure of Kirk's hard body against hers. He tried to shift away, as if the touch of her body were a flame.

"Sam," she whispered, "my kid brother is with them. Don't hurt him—for my sake. And please don't hurt Dad, when you do clash with him. Maybe he's dead wrong, but if he is, I'll make him see it. And he'll be man enough to change."

"Glad yuh didn't include Woofter in all that," Kirk said dryly, and Nadine started. She had thought Sam Kirk knew by now what she really thought of the man whose wife she might have been.

They didn't have long to wait. In minutes they heard Ed Taylor's challenge:

"That's fur enough, Woofter!"

Horses were pulling up, men talking hurriedly. But there seemed only a few men, judging by all the sounds. Nadine wished she could warn old Taylor to watch out for a split in the pursuers, but it was too late.

"Where's Kirk?" Woofter demanded.

"He's been missin' nigh onto all day," Taylor yelled back.

"Then let me come up alone and tell you something," Woofter suggested.

"Come ahead."

The two huddled in the chuckwagon heard him riding up, fairly felt the rigid silence of old Taylor and the others.

"Kirk has gone crazy," were Woofter's opening words.

"What's he done?"

"Kidnaped Nadine—half an hour before our wedding. The whole state will be roused against him. Governor Drayson will call out the National Guard if we don't get Kirk any other way. You men had better leave between suns and forget there ever was a Sam Kirk."

Woofter's bold eyes, searching Taylor's honest, distressed face saw instantly that something was wrong. Glancing about he caught sight of Nadine's slipper tracks on the muddy spokes and paled. He loved Nadine with all the power of his undisciplined being. He suspected at once that she was here, perhaps in the chuckwagon, but he refused to believe she was hiding from him of her own free will.

"Taylor," he said, "a man like you has no business standing up for Kirk. He's too low. He even stole a pocketbook from the governor's

wife. Do you think for a minute that Governor Drayson will stand for that? And here's Kirk's hat. Nobody wanted that lying about the Saddle B Ranch."

With a forced, easy laugh Woofter tossed Kirk's hat over into the wagon bed. None of the men could see that Mrs. Drayson's pocketbook went into the wagon under the hat—that purse that had such a strong odor of perfume about it that the fragrance still lingered about Woofter.

NADINE felt Sam tremble all over. She knew he ached to get at Woofter, but to kill the brazen schemer now would only bring that whole pack down on him and his woefully short-handed crew.

"Hold it, cowboy!" she whispered.

"Only because yuh're here," he whispered tightly.

Outside, Ed Taylor sprayed tobacco juice and growled. "Well, Woofter, if abuse of Sam Kirk is all the ammunition yuh got to fire, yuh might as well head back for yore weddin'—if yuh kin find yore bride. Mebbe Sam has got her—I dunno. If half the lies yuh've told in yore paper on Kirk could be believed, he ain't above stealin' a gal."

That shot struck Woofter hard. His face turned ashen, then purple.

"Anybody Kirk could steal," he vowed, "is certainly not—"

"Careful—careful what yuh say about a lady!" Taylor cut in ominously.

Woofter whirled his horse abruptly and rode back to the ten men whom he had brought into sight. He motioned toward Kirk's small remuda grazing near.

"That big grulla horse and the chestnut sorrel are Saddle B animals," he called. "Let's take 'em home with us, boys."

Woofter went galloping toward the remuda, his men following him. And Taylor and every Circle N S cowboy fell for the trick. Flinging into saddles they went dashing to challenge the accusation that stolen horses were in Sam Kirk's remuda.

Kirk himself saw through the ruse too late. Then suddenly flinging off the tarp he yelled at his men to come back. But his words were drowned out by the thud of running hoofs. Another big bunch of Saddle B riders were swooping down from the junipers and piñons, cutting off Kirk's men from the wagon.

Not all of them though. Already, Brown John was leaping to his seat on the wagon, yelling at the horses that had not been unhitched. Kirk was firing at Hense Sobell, the foremost of the charging men. The harelipped Peace Devil let out an unintelligible cry and fired as he bore down hard for Kirk. But all first shots went wild for Brown John had the team leaping away.

Kirk kept firing rapidly and Sobell slumped, fell from his saddle. And as a shower of bullets rained on the wagon Nadine snatched Kirk's extra Colt from his waistband. Kirk started to slap it down for he saw her kid brother was charging in there with the other Saddle B riders.

"Sam, I'm still for you!" the girl cried.

"But not against yore own brother!" Sam exclaimed.

He hurled her to the bottom of the wagon bed, tore the gun from her hand. Then he whipped up his own gun and tried for the first man he could get a bead on.

"I'll put a bullet through you myself for that, Kirk!" Buddy Graham was yelling shrilly.

He had seen Sam's rough handling of his sister, and naturally was convinced Nadine was a kidnap captive. Even in the heat of battle Nadine could see how deeply Kirk was stung by the boy's words, and she did so want Sam Kirk to lose his desire to fight the Grahams. She saw him glance at his dad's old

long-barreled Colt. That gun, Nadine had heard, had been notched four times in the fight against L. K. Graham. But there was no time for retrospect. Already Kirk was back in the fight.

Brown John, seeing that the Circle N S cowboys could not get back to the wagon was trying to take the wagon to them. But they were being forced into a retreat down the bank of the swollen creek. The bull cook promptly headed the wagon after them.

Hardly was the maneuver accomplished, though, before Brown John leaped upward. He fell headlong over the wagon side—dead! With the reins flying loose that was all the excited horses needed to break into a wild runaway, the wagon swaying, bouncing, rattling.

KIRK jumped for the reins but missed them as they went over the front end. He leaped out onto the tongue and, holding to the harness backstrap, went down and seized the reins.

As he came up, Nadine was on her knees in the wagon, blazing away with a Winchester. Fighting against her own father's men, even against her own brother! And still wearing the gown in which she was to have married the leader of this wolf pack! It was an inspiration to lift Sam Kirk to the heights of fighting endeavor.

For a few startled seconds Woofter's men held their fire in the face of Nadine's roaring rifle. They even slowed a little, looking to Woofter. For one more moment Woofter was breathless from astonishment. Then he let out a vicious cry, the cry of an animal dreadfully wounded.

"Don't hold back for her!" he shrieked, but he must instantly have foreseen ruination for himself if Nadine should be shot down by his order.

"Split around the wagon and pick Kirk off!" he shouted. "Don't hit Nadine."

The confused riders attempted such a split, trying to pick him off with the team down to a hard run, without endangering the girl. But at best Nadine's life was in grave jeopardy.

"Pull up and make a stand with me at the wash, boys!" Kirk yelled to his men.

He steered the team to the smoothest crossing he could see in the shallow wash. Horses and wagon splashed through the two feet of water, the wagon careening wildly. Kirk thrust the lines into Nadine's hands, stepped onto the rubber bar and dropped off.

He tried to light running, but as the wagon gave a violent bounce over a rocky spot, he was sent upending.

Nadine caught her breath in horror. His head had struck a rock and he lay in a grotesque heap. Bullets dug into the mud about him.

Ed Taylor tried to lead Kirk's men to the rescue of their fallen boss, but they could not reach him. But they did roll from their saddles and fall in behind what embankment of the wash was left them by the rushing water. From this range they might keep the raiders back until Kirk regained his senses.

One of Kirk's men tumbled on into the wash, a bullet through his brain. It was a pitifully weak little bunch left to stand off the Woofter hellions. Five against two dozen!

## CHAPTER VI

### *Six-Gun Truth*

BUT the fight was suddenly postponed for the time being. Fighting men glanced around, startled, as the ground trembled, and there came a low rumble. The beef herd was stampeding squarely for the wash! Bill Carroll, the waddy Sam Kirk had earlier sent on his way, sick at his desertion, had turned back. He had seen the attack, had tried to fire at long rifle range from down the creek. And it was his gunfire that had stampeded the herd.

Sam Kirk lay squarely in the path of the on-rushing cattle, with no time for his men to get across the flooded wash and reach him, then get him back out of danger.

"Pour it into them if they try to get to Kirk!" Woofter yelled.

All the Circle N S men could do was to fight back what limited seconds remained to them, then make for the creek to get out of the way of the cattle. Nadine was valiantly trying to get her runaway team turned, but the horses had the bits between their teeth. Frantically she see-sawed on the reins as her horrified eyes saw the onward sweep of red bodies and tossing horns. Strange, unreal, that the strong odor of perfume should have come to her nostrils at that moment.

The horses, at last seeing the oncoming cattle, veered off. A little too late, though, for cattle wedging in on the river's edge inevitably crashed into the wagon. Somehow, the horses themselves missed a serious crash, but they turned the wagon over, spilling Nadine out into the water's very edge. She was snatched downward by the swirling tide.

Her boots—an extra pair of Kirk's that she had hastily snatched on—filled with water, and her clothing bagged. No swimming thus, against such water power. She felt herself dashed up against a small pine that had caught against some willow tops. Coughing, she whipped her eyes back for the stampede.

A solitary rider was leaping his horse over the wash that had upset the wagon. Buddy—her brother! The boy yanked his horse to a halt in front of Sam Kirk. A warm glow spread through Nadine's wet, chilled body at the realization of Buddy's sportmanship. Her brother was risking his life to save a man he believed his enemy from the on-rushing cattle! The fear-maddened herd was almost upon Sam Kirk.

Buddy flogged the air with his hat, yelling shrilly at the wall of white faces nearing him. His horse reared up, trying to get out of the way of the cattle as he fired his six-shooter again and again. Bringing the mount back to the ground, Buddy beat the air with his hat more frantically. And he split the herd!

For a moment cattle poured by on both sides. Then Kirk seemed to half recover his wits. He staggered up, tried to run. Buddy bent out and seized him by the collar as the last of the cattle streaked by. Then Buddy dropped from his horse, slapped Sam Kirk across the face with a stinging palm.

And Nadine *knew* now why her brother had thrown his own life to the winds to save Sam Kirk! Just to kill him.

Of course that kid brother of hers thought he was acting under the most urgent code of gun settlement, in his sister's defense. She saw by his motions that he was ordering Kirk to fight. Noble but so utterly wrong! And so foolhardy. For Nadine knew that Kirk was far too sure a gunman for Buddy to have any slightest chance. She held her breath, paralyzed by the fear that Kirk might accept Buddy's challenge.

No, Sam must be arguing with the boy. But Nadine heard Buddy's shrill voice rise in heated unwillingness to listen, although she could not make out his words. Buddy meant to take his revenge, before the Saddle B men swarmed in swiftly, once the cattle were past them.

Buddy had his hand on his gun, waiting for Kirk to draw. Nadine tried to scream out her protest but the water in her throat started her coughing. Then she saw Sam Kirk do a gallant thing. He turned his back on the boy, even as Nadine knew Buddy must be hurling taunts of cowardice. Then Nadine found her voice. She shouted at her brother, waving at him frantically.

That motion broke loose the small pine tree to which she clung. The water took it plunging downstream and Nadine was churned under again. It was a terrible moment! While she was drowning, she thought despairingly her brother might be shooting Sam Kirk in the back!

THE moment Nadine shot to the surface, she cried out to Buddy with all the power left in her lungs. Nor was it a cry of help for herself. Even in that disastrous moment all she could think of was that she must stop her brother's fight with Kirk.

Nadine got only a brief picture of the scene back up the creek. Buddy was dashing down the creek bank for her. The stampeding cattle were still blocking Woofter's men and Kirk was yelling at his own men, motioning them down the creek toward the narrows, as if to make his stand there. Then Kirk was on the run for her too, with all the power of his long legs.

Drawn under again, Nadine began to struggle. What a horrible end! No, she was once more on the surface, just in time to grasp out desperately at the same pine tree that washed downward with her. She did catch and held on like grim death, coughing and strangling.

Buddy had plunged his mount into the water, after her, but was entangled in willow tops. The raging creek was turning horse and boy over and over as it hurled them downward. Buddy was fighting for his own life now.

Then Kirk, on a Circle N S horse he had got somehow, was dashing into the water for Nadine, spurring his mount unmercifully. Buddy had been hurled against a great rock that thrust itself upward in the stream, but it was plain he could not hold it long.

"Get Nadine!" the boy yelled at Kirk.

Urging his plunging horse as near Nadine as the animal would go, Kirk tossed out his looped lasso. The water sucked it away from her and Nadine was heaved out of sight. She was yards from Kirk when she came up again; nearly gone, too. Kirk fought toward her again, made a better throw. Weakly she lifted an arm, let the rope encircle it and draw tight.

At the bank Kirk yanked her out of the water, tore the loop from her arm, and sped back to Buddy. He fought his horse into the water as Buddy dropped from his rock and pulled frantically for Kirk. And he made it!

The moment Buddy was on land, without stopping a moment, Kirk made for the narrows where Ed Taylor had rallied his men for a finish stand. Rifles were crashing their song of hate and death.

Blood was streaming from a wound in Kirk's thigh as he rushed off, Nadine and Buddy went running after him. To her amazement, Buddy was still bent on killing Sam Kirk.

"But he just saved your life," Nadine protested.

"I could've made it myself. Be-

sides, I'd just saved his life, so that's square!"

"I never could have got out alive!" Nadine declared hotly.

"Aw, he wanted yuh for his kidnap tricks again," Buddy countered. He brushed past her, calling to the hastening cowmen: "I'm givin' yuh one other chance to fight me, Kirk!"

Nadine pleaded, but Buddy remained unconvinced.

"At least let him tell you what he's told me," the sister implored.

"Why're yuh so all-fired set in his favor!" Buddy demanded. "Yuh talk like yuh're in love with him—a Kirk, and a rustler!"

It was a boy's blunt speech, but it made Nadine turn red to the roots of her hair.

"I was up above the Mesquite River bridge a little ways when this fight first broke loose, and saw Kirk kiss yuh," Buddy blurted. "I thought then it was because yuh couldn't help yourself. Did yuh want him to?"

The lad's voice carried scorn, unbelief. But Nadine put a gentle hand on his arm.

"I'm not so sure, Buddy," she murmured, "but what I did want him to. He's wonderful. Let him tell you his side. We've never heard it before. If he's right, our own Dad is dead wrong. And if Dad is wrong—well, couldn't we be big enough to admit it?"

But Buddy had the Graham stubborness. He hadn't answered Nadine when Kirk put an end to their debate by calling out to his force:

"Boys, they're splittin' up! Woofter is pullin' off with half his men. Goin' to climb the mountainside, mebbe, and fall in behind us, while the others keep us crowded right here. Then they'll blast us off the face of the earth."

"If you're foolish enough to wait for it, Sam," Nadine interrupted. "What've we to gain by fighting here like this?"

"Everything," Kirk vowed.

Nadine studied that bronzed face of his, saw its raw strength, fine courage, rugged handsomeness. Above all, its reflection of sheer power of soul. She was almost ready to tell him of the starting thought that had forced itself upon her from the moment she first lifted a Winchester and sent its bullet singing off into the deadly struggle; an overwhelming thought, perhaps impossible. Yet fraught with so much good if it worked. Would he, could he see it?

"This is no way to win your fight, cowboy," she said. "Not if you had three times the men you have."

"Nadine," Buddy cut in angrily, "yuh don't mean to help him whip Dad, do yuh? If you're that kind of a sister, to go daffy over a rustler and—"

"Shut up, Buddy!"

THAT was Kirk's sharp, hard order. To Nadine's surprise, Buddy shut up. That mysterious power of Sam Kirk to command men had done it.

"It takes something bigger than bullets, Sam," Nadine said hurriedly. "First, it takes the *right*. You've got that. Then it takes brains. You've got that. So, let's try mixing brains and printer's ink."

"Ink?"

"Yes. Woofter has used it to make people believe you're a regular Satan on horseback. Even many of your old friends think you've gone bad. Let's give them our side of the story. Go into Latigo, take possession of the Latigo *News*. Tell your story to the county—to the state; even to the whole country. Nothing less is worthy of you, Sam."

A queer silence fell over that little group. Kirk's brown eyes were boring into Nadine's, studying her as he would the face of a man who held life and death for him. Nadine grew a little uneasy under that long, calm searching of her soul. She couldn't stand it if he should accuse

her of trickery. But as she gave him back look for look she saw something new and mighty dawn in Sam Kirk's face.

"Yuh're plumb right, girl," he said. "But it'll be hard on you, Nadine, to support a thing like that. Blood runs thicker than water with any Graham, I know. But I'm not goin' to lay yore dad out as a rascal I'll show him up only as a bullheaded cowman that wants no neighbors. But Woofter—that's different!"

BUDDY broke in to argue for his finish fight with Kirk, but his conviction was slipping. Sam Kirk was too earnest to go unheard. He came nearer Nadine, dropping a strong, friendly hand onto Buddy's shoulder.

"It'll save yore dad's soul, Nadine—Buddy," he said, and his voice seemed to beg them to hear him. "If L. K. Graham wins, it'll mean he browbeats a whole corner of the Southwest, year after year. Growin' more greedy for grass every year; less fittin' to look a plumb square-shooter in the eye. More, he'll be only a stool for Woofter to stand on. Woofter means to be senator, mebbe governor—the big, dirty boss of all this neck o' the woods. He's usin' yore dad for his start. Do yuh want that? Or, do yuh want to hurt him a little now, and fetch old L. K. back to where he can yell 'Howdy' at the poorest little milk-pen rancher around!"

There was a queer look in Nadine's face. Buddy's stubborn holding off reminded her again of what her rebellion against her father's harsh power was going to cost her and that proud old range lion. It hurt her to think of her father's pain when he learned that his daughter had gone against him, even temporarily, and that his only son had been converted to the enemy's cause. But Nadine knew the fight had gone beyond mere blind loyalties and prejudices. Men's very souls were at stake, not just grass and cows. Big men, who were worth all it might take to stand them on solid ground.

"How do you know, sis," Buddy argued, "that Kirk isn't jest a smart cow thief—and woman-fooler?"

The word "thief" reminded Nadine of something. Picking up her long, drenched skirt she went striding away on past where Woofter's men lay behind rocks and shoulders of earth.

The whole embattled canyon paused to watch.

She found Mrs. Drayson's pocketbook where the creek water was lapping at it, came back, stopping midway between the two forces. Motioning for Woofter, Kirk and Buddy to come to her she called for each side to hold fire.

Kirk strode forward boldly with Buddy trailing, as Woofter swaggered forward with amusedly twitching lips. He smiled at Nadine as he glanced back at the pocketbook. Now was he to reap the fruit of his clever forethought. He stopped when he was within hand's reach of Nadine, but Sam Kirk halted back ten paces. Nadine looked Kirk squarely in the eye.

"Homer says you stole Mrs. Drayson's pocketbook, Sam." And to the other man: "Any proof, Homer?"

The smirk on Woofter's face faded.

"Buck Bacon and Sherm Harkhorn," he said carelessly, "both saw Kirk stick the pocketbook into his shirt as he left the house."

Nadine called for the two Peace Devils. They came, swaggering, confident. Yes, they had seen Kirk steal the pocketbook. Kirk's dark eyes were fairly aflame with rage. It was hard to hold in when he wanted so to fight.

"Homer," Nadine demanded, "do you remember seeing Mrs. Drayson's pocketbook at all?"

"No, of course not."

"Wasn't even near her when she had it in her hands?"

"Certainly not. What're you driving at?"

Nadine bent forward, sniffed at Woofter's left side above the belt. Then she stepped back, her blue eyes blazing fire. She jerked open the pocketbook to show a perfume bottle without a stopper.

"Homer, you were carrying that pocketbook inside your shirt when the stopper came out," she said, in measured tones, "Your shirt reeks with it. Smell it, Buddy!"

Buddy did and swore a low oath. Nadine's voice lifted in fiery words. "It would be bad enough to steal a pocketbook for money. But to do it just to condemn another man when he's down—Homer Woofter, you're lower than a snake!"

The words burned off her lips as she flung the pocketbook into Woofter's face.

Woofter stood stock still as amazement in his eyes gave way to hate. All his love for Nadine seemed instantaneously turned to fiendish hate. His eyes yellowed, glared at her with a terrible light. From here on, the one idea of his life would be to punish Nadine even more than he did Kirk. He turned to young Harkhorn and Buck Bacon.

"Kill him," he ordered, in low, cold voice.

Two speedy gunslingers, Bacon and Harkhorn. Sam Kirk's hand darted for his gun butt. Harkhorn went diving to the left, but Bacon merely squatted to aid his hand in the draw.

Swift, loud gun talk then, with death in its tone. But Sam Kirk beat Bacon to the draw, stopped him cold with a ball through the breast before he could fire. Harkhorn was blazing away as he hit the ground, but too hastily. The bullet burned across Kirk's arm, but Kirk got his assailant in the abdomen. Harkhorn fired frantically once more, then Kirk drilled him through the heart.

The fight was over almost as soon as it started. Nadine turned her head away and tears streamed down her cheeks. Woofter made no move to carry the gun fight further himself. He spun on his heels and stalked away with a deliberateness that said he was by no means whipped by the mere loss of two hirelings.

"Why don't you get him, Sam?" Buddy cried, hoarse with excitement.

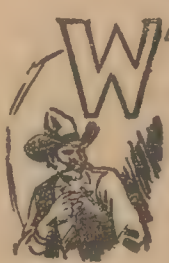
"Yesterday," Kirk said slowly, "I reckon nothin' could've stopped me. Today—well, I've got a plumb different outlook."

During the gun fight, Woofter's men had kept levelled guns on the spot. But Woofter would have been placed in too great peril for them to cut loose. Now Woofter's own actions held them silent in puzzlement; awed, too. For this Sam Kirk had put quick and conclusive end to three of the Peace Devils now.

Kirk walked back as slowly as Woofter. A strange ending to a strange meeting. Both sides were to start from here to gather strength for a stupendous struggle, and both knew it was to be a struggle marked by the bitterest passion that can burn in human hearts.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Saddle Loyalty*



WATCHING the new Sam Kirk who expanded before her eyes, Nadine thrilled at his vital, masterly power. Outwardly unchanged, inwardly, she knew, he was looking beyond the blaze of powder.

His beef herd was scattering up the open part of the canyon. It had to be left to Woofter for the time being, and Nadine knew how that hurt Kirk, because it was in such a range-bred man as he to fight for a

bunch of cattle as long as life lasts. And Nadine thrilled, not because she felt she had turned Kirk away from gun fighting, but because she had seen it was in him to rise above mere bullet settlement.

They were getting ready to give up the narrows, but Woofter must be kept in ignorance of this as long as possible. Kirk made a pretense of disposing his men along the narrows, as if to hold it indefinitely. Nadine herself crawled up to leave her hat barely showing between a rock and a manzanita bush.

When all was set, Kirk's men huddled together in a grave, hasty exchange of words. When they came on to meet Kirk, Nadine and Buddy old Ed Taylor was swearing under his breath, looking at Nadine with something like open mistrust.

"SAM," he declared, "this is the craziest thing I ever knowed yuh to do. Me, I'm all for stayin' and smokin' it out with 'em. How we know that Woofter never put up his bride to completely takin' the fight outa yuh jest like this? And here's Graham's boy, too. Cain't yuh see it's damn dangerous to trust such a layout?"

"We'll go back home if you don't want us," Buddy hastened to declare.

"We want you and yore sister," Kirk assured him quickly.

The weather-beaten Taylor bit off a chew of tobacco without realizing that he had a big quid in his jaw already.

"Sam, boy," he said, talking around his double chew, "don't yuh see this gal is only workin' on yuh to make it easier for her pa and new husband? Ef yuh're imaginin' that she's in love with *you* instead o' Woofter and his money, jest ask her right plain out here and now."

Loyal, well meaning old Taylor! Nadine's face went red, then paled. Kirk had as good as told her that he loved her with all the power of his intense being, and she didn't want him hurt. But she hadn't admitted to herself that she loved Sam Kirk. To have old Taylor blurt out so crudely the suggestion that she did not crushed and humiliated her to the point of stark distress.

Kirk had turned ashen. She saw poignant suffering in his eyes, but he acted quickly. Stepping over to Taylor he seized the weather beaten old waddy roughly by the shoulder.

"Ed," he said, voice taut, "yuh've punched cows on this outfit ever since I kin remember. Yuh showed me how to top off a salty bronc, how to throw a gun in a hurry. Most of all, yuh've showed this whole country how to stick to yore outfit, year in and year out, through hell when it had to come. I need yuh now more than ever. But— Well, Ed, yuh're fired!"

"Fired?"

Ed's one exclamatory word began high, trailed off into a weak nothing. In it was amazement, humiliation, contriteness—and shame. He spat out his double quid of tobacco, tried to say something but couldn't make his tongue move to the words. He turned his head to hide the mist in his aging grey eyes. Then he went slowly toward his horse, one of those salvaged from the scattered mounts.

Taylor swung into the saddle, faced Kirk with something like defiance as he reloaded his age-worn old .44 Colt. Nadine grew uneasy. Did Taylor mean to challenge Kirk to a gun duel?

Taylor slipped in the last cartridge and kept the gun in his hand. Then he doffed his hat to Nadine.

"I hope, ma'am," he said huskily, "that time proves me to be the biggest jackass that ever got loose on the range. Sam, boy, forgive me if I've been only a clabber-brained old fool."

Without giving Kirk time to say a

word old Taylor whirled his horse. Then, before anybody dreamed of what he meant to do, he was charging hard for Woofter's line of men formed across the canyon. His hoarse battle cry lifted between canyon walls.

"*Hi-yi-yip-yip-yipity-yip.* Here's how I git fired, Mr. J. Homer Woofter!"

Spurring into a hard run Taylor cut loose a leaden slug at the first enemy head that lifted. Nobody fired back at him at first. Woofter's outfit was too startled, probably believing it part of some trick.

BUT Taylor went dashing on into their line, killing one man as he came on. Then guns cut loose at him. But not with too deadly accuracy. Woofter's men, still fearing a trick, did not dare turn to shoot at Taylor without exposing themselves to Kirk's men. Ed Taylor reeled in his saddle, but caught to the horn and held on. He fired back over the flank of his horse till his gun went empty, then charged on, disappearing into the willows.

Nadine had watched, spellbound. She turned to Kirk, her eyes misty. And Sam Kirk had tears in his own eyes.

But he said not a word, nor did Nadine break the awed silence.

But Ed Taylor had shown them only half his mad courage. Suddenly the willows split open and he was back, gun loaded again! He was trying to give forth his cowboy yell, but the bullet that had passed through a lung made it a weak effort.

But as he tore at Woofter's line this time guns began to bark at him instantly.

That was too much for Sam Kirk. He broke for the Woofter line, his five men following him on the run. Buddy came next; then Nadine. Guns were roaring as they ran, and their counter charge compelled Woofter's outfit to forget Ed Taylor and whip guns about to face them.

That was all Kirk wanted. He dived in behind a rock, poured lead across it. With his men following his example, Ed Taylor was able to reach the Woofter line and break through it. Then he fell forward across his saddle horn, hit again.

The crazed charge was over. Taylor swung his horse in behind the shoulder of cliff from which he had started, but Kirk and his allies could not make it back there at once. Old Taylor waved his hat at them, then went riding on down the canyon. A great red splotch showed on his back. The side of his head glistened red. One of his legs dangled loose in the stirrup. Shot to pieces, yet living to ride out. Fired! But leaving with his name to be immortal among those who would recount tales around roundup fires in time to come.

"We got to go look after him, boys," Kirk said anxiously. "Besides, Woofter sees now that our lines was only a fake. They'll be chargin' us pronto."

Nadine got the significance of that. Somebody had to hold Woofter back, to keep up a bluff while the rest of the little band got away. An impetuous thought swept into her mind.

"Sam," she suggested, "you hold Woofter back, while the rest of us hightail it out of here."

There was a queer catch in her throat as she spoke. Kirk glanced closely at her, then told his men to get going. Nadine forced her unwilling hands and feet to begin the crawl that took her down the creek, sick with fear as she realized that Kirk's men were following her.

"Maybe I've sentenced him to death!" she accused herself. "Oh, why didn't I know it anyway?"

She had told Sam to stay for one vital reason. Perhaps knowing him

to be in the shadow of death once more would give her the answer to that question that old Taylor had set throbbing through her head. Did she love Sam Kirk? Now she knew she did! She loved him with such maddening abandon that sweat began to bead out on her forehead more heavily with every forward move her crawling hands took. She couldn't endure it. She twisted about.

"Sam, you come too!" Her words were a cry of anguished pleading.

"Go ahead. I'll shag it right behind yuh," Kirk said. "And listen, fellers, hit for Latigo City. But scatter, and each man try to reach as many little ranchers and homesteaders as yuh kin along the way. Tell 'em to streak it for Latigo. There's goin' to be a final showdown to see who will own this country." His lips tightened as he gave what he well knew might be the last instructions he would ever give.

"We got only three horses left," he said. "Nadine, you and Buddy take one. Let the cowboys have one to wrangle more mounts on as they go along. Leave the fastest for me. I'm goin' to have to go outa here slingin' plenty of mud."

NADINE compelled her half-numb limbs to go with the rest as they stole away. Buddy crawled back to Kirk and started to say something, but couldn't find words. He just held out his hand. Sam grasped it warmly. Buddy came on to join Nadine, but he kept glancing back as often as the tortured Nadine.

Further down, Nadine put Buddy onto their horse. The cowboys urged her to come on with them, but Nadine refused. Buddy refused to go on, too, insisting on staying with his sister.

Nadine watched back for Kirk. Some of Woofter's men were crawling in above him, to slip down behind him in the brush. Nadine was tense with fear, watching them. She called too loud for Kirk to ride for it and he did make a break for his horse, but Woofter's men had heard and set up a cry. Men came bounding after Kirk, guns booming. But he made it to the horse Nadine held for him. When he remembered that Nadine and Buddy must ride the same mount, he seized Nadine in his arms, flung her upon the horse.

"No, no, I won't go without you, Sam!" she cried.

"All right," he agreed, and leaped up behind her.

The excited Buddy spurred out ahead of them. But Nadine's horse began to pitch at its double burden as Kirk had anticipated. With his left arm clamped about her, holding her in the saddle with bearlike strength he seized the reins, jerked the horse's head up tight. As he raked the rebellious mount with his spurs it quit pitching and broke into a run down the canyon.

"I'm quittin' yuh pronto," Kirk told her. "You better go into Latigo. Might need yuh to write the editorial page of the paper we're puttin' out. Me, I'll take to a side canyon. I'm shore to find a hoss somewhere in the lower country. You and Buddy push right on. Woofter and his men have got to run back for their hosses before they kin race yuh."

Half a mile down the canyon, he swerved off, but did not see that Nadine was following him. Two of his cowboys were bending over a third man over in some squaw bushes.

Old Ed Taylor was dying. His face brightened at sight of Kirk and he tried to laugh.

"Yuh—played hell—tryin' to fire me—Sammy, boy," he said hoarsely, but the effort took his last breath.

Kirk bent down, gripped the old man's hand.

"When all the strays are tallied up above, Ed," he whispered, "yuh'll shore be a-wearin' the glory brand."

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Parade of Power*

ALL in and around Latigo City word had been spread that Sam Kirk was on the rampage, that he had aroused small ranchers to open rebellion against the powerful Woofter-Graham combination. Latigo City, therefore, was just a little surprised to see Kirk ride in alone the next morning.

He made for the restaurant directly opposite the *Latigo News,* ordered double portions of ham, eggs, coffee, hot biscuits. Long, sharp-nosed Bob Hallstead, one of Kirk's cowboys, dropped in, then another hand. Buddy Graham was with the next Circle N S man. Early as it was, people began to fill the street. Something was going to break, but no one could guess just what.

They got a better idea when a band of horsemen rode down the street. Woofter rode at the head of no less than three dozen men on a coal-black gelding. Woofter must have hired every footloose man in the country. White-haired Governor Drayson rode beside him, and back of the horsemen came buggies, buckboards, surreys. The great ranch-house on Mesquite River had emptied itself of guests during the night.

No such parade had ever moved through Latigo before. Rifles were numerous in saddleboots. Extra six-shooters were strapped to saddle-horns. But greater than these punitive weapons was the moral force engendered by the presence of the governor. Large placards on the side of one surrey announced:

THE OUTLAW, SAM KIRK
KIDNAPED THE BRIDE
HE DEFIES A WHOLE STATE
BY DEFYING OUR GOVERNOR

It was not like Sam Kirk to hide when such a challenge was flung into his face, so he strolled out onto the sidewalk, six men at his heels, stood there stolidly while the horsemen filed past, two abreast. He met the triumphant glances of Woofter defiantly.

Kirk noticed Woofter glancing past him as if trying to see into the restaurant, as if suspicious that Kirk might have a much larger force concealed there. And Sam Kirk grinned. He knew Woofter would not turn this parade into an attack as long as he had any fear of nearly equal numbers.

But abruptly Kirk went cold to the bottom of his boots. Nadine was in the surrey with Mrs. Drayson! She was carrying one of those placards, too. The little traitor!

But he couldn't believe it of her, nor could Buddy. The boy, at Kirk's elbow, emitted a grunt of disappointment when he spied Nadine riding in such style with the governor's wife. For, once convinced, Buddy had come over to Kirk's cause with all the ardor of his youthful heart.

L. K. Graham was just as surprised, apparently, when he saw his son standing with Kirk. The hard old cow king loved Buddy as only such a father can—and Buddy was going to carry on the Graham name. Graham pulled up his horse, fastened unbelieving eyes on his son.

"Kid, aren't yuh in the wrong pew?" he demanded bluntly.

Buddy gulped, face aflame. He had never gone against his father's least wish before. Nadine half arose, watching breathlessly.

"I've got to ride square, Dad," Buddy stammered. "And here's where I am."

"You mean I'm not square?" Graham roared.

"It's the company you keep," Buddy said defiantly.

Graham cast swift looks at Woof-

ter, the governor, then at the big force of men.

"I'd be relieved, boy," he said coldly, "if yuh'd take a new name. I —I have no son. Not now."

Lips grim, Graham settled back in his saddle, spurred his horse. The parade got into motion again.

People were fairly pouring onto the street. But Nadine saw that Kirk had eyes only for her as her surrey pulled by. He stared at her fiercely, believing her mocking him as she half smiled. She was wearing most becoming range clothes now—a forty-dollar Stetson of cream color, blue silk shirt, yellow neckerchief, split riding habit.

AS Nadine saw the distress in Kirk's eyes at her apparent desertion she was afraid to goad him any longer. She turned over the placard she had been holding against the side of the surrey. People stared, then began to titter. She saw Kirk color, as if he thought the crowd was laughing at him for having trusted this enemy girl. Nadine could see his anger, knew he was no man to be made a laughing stock of. Nadine winked, gave a slight nod down at the placard. On the side not supposed to be seen, she had written:

This parade is a dead bluff. Dad is wrong.

People began to cheer Nadine's placard. Woofter bowed and doffed his hat, thinking it was for his own show of strength. Even Graham waved in appreciation of the supposed approval.

The parade halted in front of the courthouse and Sheriff Mallory came out. For moments Governor Drayson talked to Mallory. The sheriff motioned and eight deputies came hurrying out. The parade started back then—but without the women! That meant business!

Down the street, Sam Kirk called back through the restaurant. Nine fighting men came from the kitchen, little ranchers ready to follow their leader through hell, now that they had to—or quit like whipped curs. With them at his heels, Kirk headed across the street.

Editor Blake of the *News* had stood outside, making notes as the parade passed. He was a thin, silent man, grey-templed. Kirk went up to him.

"Step inside, pard," he ordered. "We got business with yuh."

The astonished editor obeyed. Kirk left a dozen men outside the little newspaper shop.

"I'm puttin' out the paper today," Kirk told the editor. "And she's goin' to tell the gawdamighty truth for once. Set down. Write what I tell yuh. Then put 'er in print."

The editor hesitated. Kirk poked a .44 muzzle beneath his nose.

"I mean business, Blake. That whole parade, nor the sheriff's gang neither, can't stop us."

A wry smile touched the lean editor's face. "Sam," he said, "I've almost prayed for a chance like this. I have a family to keep or I'd never turned out Woofter's lies all this time for him. You keep a gun on me, just as though I were forced to it, and I'll put your story in print, from A to Z."

"All right—write this at the top:"

WOOFTER'S LAST STAND

Kirk began to talk. With blunt, forceful words he showed the Woofter-Graham combination as making its final bid for entire domination of a whole section of country. Little ranchers and homesteaders run off; patented land gobbled up; brazen killings, even, when that was required to rid the range of some game fighter.

But his recital was soon interrupted. Outside Woofter halted his mounted men where Kirk's men stood guard between restaurant and

print shop, this time powder keg and spark were close together.

One mistaken move might start a deadly fight.

"Henry Hicks"—Woofter measured one of Kirk's rancher allies—"you're a bigger fool than I thought. What do you hope for, you rebels? You're bucking this whole state, do you know that? And look at these." He waved a hand at his mounted crew.

SAM stepped outside, listened calmly. His very presence seemed to give his cornered allies fresh strength of heart. One of them calmly took out makings and built a cigarette while Woofter ranted.

Just back of the crowd, Nadine had Sheriff Mallory cornered. She was driving home rapid-fire words with the slap of her small fist into the other palm. More and more people began to listen to her instead of Woofter. Mallory looked harried, but kept shaking his head.

"All right, then," Nadine cried, "if you don't want to give the underdog a fair chance, you better get ready to fight!"

Whirling, she pushed through the crowd, straight for the newspaper office. People looked at her curiously as she passed. Red spots burned in her cheeks. A mist was in her eyes.

"Nady, stay out of there!" her father begged as he pushed his horse forward. "That place is going to be riddled with bullets, if Kirk's crowd resists arrest."

"Arrest for what?" Nadine fired back.

"For the killing of not less than four men within the last twenty hours!"

"For killing your Peace Devils who were trying to kill him!" Nadine flung back. "I saw two of the killings, and I rejoiced when Sam proved just a little better shot than two of them at once could be!"

"Without further talk," Graham laid down his ultimatum, "it has to be me or Kirk. Which is it?"

"It's you *and* Kirk, but not Woofter," Nadine answered, as everybody listened breathlessly to this strange conversation between father and daughter.

"It's still me or Kirk," Graham insisted. "Which one, Nady?"

It was costing the proud old range lion plenty to beg his own child to stay with him. Nadine tilted her head upward. The mist in her eyes became tears. An awed silence fell on the street.

"Daddy," she said, "yesterday I saw old Ed Taylor deliberately give his life to prove to Sam Kirk that he wanted nothing but to be loyal to him. I'd give all you've ever made in your rich cow business if you could only inspire the love of a hard-boiled old cow hand like that. Now, why—"

"Me or Kirk," Graham cut in wrathfully.

"If," she said painfully, "it has to be men's reputations and lives against cattle and grass and waterholes and hired guns—I'm going to stand with men who *are* men!"

She turned into the newspaper office. Graham looked as though a knife had been thrust into his breast. Both his children had taken a public stand against him.

"Come inside, boys," Nadine said, "and see that no Woofter hired gun comes within forty feet of this door."

The milling crowd in the street grew, muttering speculations. Woofter took full charge out there, even giving Governor Drayson orders. Drayson called to Sam Kirk to surrender. So did the sheriff. Kirk merely stood in the doorway, a grim smile barely touching his lips. The sheriff made a move toward him.

"That's far enough!"

Kirk's voice was scarcely above a conversational pitch, yet it was

heard by every person in the street. This moment would go down in the history of the state. A governor looking on, and the open ally of range spoilers. Greed was entrenched behind law and money's power was pitted against one range rebel and his comrades.

The sheriff hesitated, but Woofter yelled at him to go on.

"Why not deputize Woofter," Kirk suggested, "and let him come for me?"

A ripple of laughter ran over the crowd. That broke the ice in Kirk's campaign to swing the common man to his side.

SOME nervous man let his six-shooter go off accidentally—and it was like a match to powder. On the instant several of Woofter's men fired at Kirk. The cowboy ducked inside and the crowd stampeded for safer ground. A few of Woofter's hirelings went with them. Woofter, Graham and thirty men were left to fight.

"I will go telegraph for the state militia!" Governor Drayson shouted.

Bob Hallstead winked at Kirk. "We cut all wires as we came in," he said grinning.

Bullets shattered glass. Kirk and his men were at the windows, front and rear. Rifles barked above the roar of six-guns. Fortunately, a

'dobe wall separated the front office from the press room which permitted Editor Blake and his one helper to continue work. And never was stranger dictation made. Sam Kirk, rifle out the window, shouted his story back to Blake, interspersed with rifle shots.

"My Dad had eleven thousand cattle fifteen years ago—was honest—worked hard. But Graham wanted his grass and water. They fought for years. Dad straight from the shoulder—Graham like any range czar. Four months ago my Father rode in with a bullet hole through his breast. Died hangin' onto the home corral bars. 'Drygulched' was the only word he got out. Before Woofter hooked up with Graham, the Saddle B riders never was bushwhackers."

Kirk went on with more details of the Woofter-Graham oppression. One little cattleman after another shipped out, virtually robbed. Others living in daily terror, for the Peace Devils had done away with not less than five men since October. And those left could stand this sort of thing no more!

Several times Kirk had to stop dictation. The fighting got hotter when Woofter realized the full damage all this could do. Kirk's little force, down behind its 'dobe walls, fired sparingly, but from Woofter's men who had taken refuge in buildings along the opposite side of the street came waves of gunfire. In the lull could be heard the groans of a wounded man or the pleadings of a weeping woman for her man to come away.

In the heat of mid-afternoon an old man down the street helped a wounded son. Still the guns—the powder-grimed faces. Two men lay dead beside Sam Kirk. Three more were wounded. Buddy Graham had an arm in a sling and Nadine was grimly loading rifles. And all the while the printing press kept running, and L. K. Graham had been strangely missing for hours.

A locomotive whistled. The one daily train coming in at this end of the branch line. Governor Drayson would leave on that train shortly. He could reach uncut wires then—summon the militia.

## CHAPTER IX

### *Powder News*

UNENDING hours seemed to have passed before at last the paper was ready. Five hundred copies—all that were left of them later to be sought by collectors all over the country. One with a bloodstain on it to sell for eighteen hundred dollars.

All these hours Woofter had been resorting to every trick known to turn sentiment against the embattled Kirk. He paid for whiskey by the gallon, had clever hirelings go about spreading falsehoods regarding Sam Kirk's outlaw doings. Now, up the street Woofter came marching, with a hundred or more new men behind. They halted, spread out, ready for a charge.

It looked bad. Nadine wondered if Kirk meant to ask his rebel comrades to die trying to stop that charge. She had a way to stop it herself! She ran back into the press room, nodded to Buddy, who already had been told what to do. Buddy seized a heavy lever, crashed it into an old door, beat two panels out. The door led into an adjoining store building. Nadine pushed through, with all the papers she could carry. Buddy followed. Out onto the street the boy staggered with his load. He ran down the sidewalk, hurling papers right and left.

Nadine dropped out of a window of the hardware store with her huge bundle of papers. Grabbing a horse at a hitch-rack she galloped up the main street, casting papers to the wind. They were seized avidly, read by a dozen people at a time.

Back at the newspaper office, Kirk and his helpers hurled more papers out. Small boys ran in for them when nobody else dared disobey Woofter, for already the papers were fetching fifty cents apiece. Woofter seized some and burned them, but more and more copies spread over the town. And the timely appearance of the papers halted Woofter's mass attack by diverting even his own men's attention.

Vainly Woofter tried to rally them. They were busy, even the drunken ones, reading the papers, arguing, taking sides.

"Hurrah for Kirk!" someone suddenly yelled.

Woofter was smart. He took this

[*Turn Page*]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turn of the tide in his stride, but prepared in his own crafty way to put an end to Sam Kirk and take back the girl he had lost. He meant to take her now because he hated her with savage intensity, wanted to punish her with hell's own cruelty.

"Hey, Governor," he called, "it's only about ten minutes till your train leaves."

That was a shrewd limitation of words. But he moved on, whispering to some of his men, here and there. Shortly, three men proclaimed aloud that they were sick of the fight, and stalked off. Soon two more followed, without a word. Woofter's force seemed shot to pieces by deserters.

Over in the newspaper building, Sam Kirk wiped his sweating, blood-stained brow. "Well, fellers," he told his loyal little bunch, "that job is done. Now we got to stop Drayson from leavin' on that train. You fellers stir up a big rumpus here in front."

A moment later, as Nadine came galloping back, she saw Kirk jump out of a second-story window of the old hardware store, on to a roof, his shirt crammed full of papers. He made half a block on the roofs of adjoining houses, but popping guns marked his course. Nadine was frantic. To draw Sam's enemies off, she rushed into an alley, crying:

"Here, Sam, up behind me!"

AS her cry brought most of his pursuers rushing after her, Kirk was already streaking it for a hitch-rack. She jumped her horse over a low yard fence, cut across and threw herself between Sam Kirk and the hungry guns. He was ribbing it hard up a crooked little side street. Angry men shrieked at Nadine to get out of the way. Kirk himself called back a plea for her to let him make it alone, but she rode between him and his enemy pack until he was heading out of town.

When men began to overtake her, she swung in front of the foremost, throwing their horses off stride and gaining precious yards for Kirk that he would need. One man tried to rope her horse, but she outran him, jerking the rope off her saddle and building a loop on the dead run. She made a realistic pretense of forefooting the horse of the man out in front, forced him to yank his horse up short.

Kirk would make it now. He had gone plunging into the chaparral north of town and he knew how to dodge. They would be slow to tear into any place where he might wait to pick off the first man to show himself.

Nadine gave up running interference, but she knew what to do next. Kirk would cut back to intercept Governor Drayson's train somewhere below town and would take Drayson off if he had to fight a dozen men. It was that certainty of Kirk's desperateness that made Nadine resolve to cut back for the train herself.

Back in town she hitched her horse to throw off two men attempting to follow her. Scurrying down an alley, she got another horse and went hurrying out of town parallel to the railroad.

She was almost too late, too. The combination freight and passenger train was puffing down the line when, off in a bottom behind it, Nadine saw a saddled horse running loose. Kirk's dapple grey! He had already swung aboard then. She must do the same thing.

But luck went against her. The train was moving too fast; the down-hill course too rough. The train clicked on past her before she could get within fifty yards of it. But she saw Kirk through the window, guns in each hand, Governor Drayson on his feet and her father beside the governor. Other passengers were ducking below seats.

Nadine was dismayed at missing

the train with Kirk in such danger. She fought the horse on down desperately hoping she might get another chance to get aboard, wondering if Kirk had seen her and was angry at her taking such perilous chances.

But Sam had not seen her. He was too busy with his task in hand.

"Kirk," Graham was saying to him, with painful effort, "nothing in all my life ever hurt me half as much as to have my two kids side against me—and with you. While

the fight went on, I sneaked off to myself and got down to rock-bottom thinkin'. And yuh've told me things in the *News* that I never dreamed Woofter would do. So I was jest tryin' to persuade Governor Drayson not to send for the militia."

KIRK knew how much it cost Graham to make that admission. Drayson, however, was unmoved.

"Governor," Kirk told him, "yuh're not goin' to call the militia. I'm takin' yuh off to some safe place till I fetch peace to our range."

"Why, you young fool!" Drayson exploded. "I'll make you pay for this if I do nothing else the rest of my administration."

"Mebbe yuh'll change yore mind after yuh find out Woofter is no longer the big feller with a pocketful of votes to deliver."

"If he is proved to be wrong, I would change my mind, of course," the little governor said diplomatically.

Kirk distributed his newspapers to the dozen passengers. When they had gone another mile, he forced the brakeman to stop the train, and put Drayson and the crippled Graham off.

Then it happened. A freight car door suddenly shot back. At least fifteen guns bristled from it, with masked men behind them. Kirk was caught cold. He lifted his hands.

"I'm a gone goslin' this time," he thought. He knew well enough Woofter would not let him slip out of his grasp again.

Three of the masked men pushed Governor Drayson back onto the train. The executive needed no urging to scuttle inside. Three men jumped five horses out of another car, and as if by previous arrangements, the locomotive of the passenger jerked into motion.

For desperate seconds Kirk thought of going for his Colt, and trying to get Woofter before they got him. But if he forced them to kill him now his fight would be ended just as he appeared to be gaining ground, and while he was alive there was always a chance.

When the train was out of sight, Woofter took off his mask and smiled wolfishly, nodding to a henchman to take Kirk's gun.

"Well," he gloated, "this is one time a trap worked perfectly. I knew you would try kidnaping the governor. That's why I shouted so loud for him to go to the station."

"Homer, let me run this thing," Graham interceded.

"And be as loco as your two precious children," Woofter growled.

Only three of Woofter's Peace Devils were left. He called this trio aside and talked low for a few moments.

"I can't even let you witness the hangin' now, L. K.," he said grimly as he stalked back. "You might turn state's evidence. Got to tie you up till it's all over."

Tying Graham to a tree, off out of sight of the railroad, Woofter and his men led Kirk over into the next canyon, long rifle range away.

Then halted beneath some big cottonwoods, threw a rope up over a limb and put Kirk onto a horse. Woofter himself adjusted the noose about Kirk's neck and tied his hands behind him with a piggin' rope.

"*I'll* get out the next edition of my paper," he taunted, "and it's going to tell of the happy marriage of Homer Woofter and Nadine."

Kirk laughed into his tormentor's face. "Try and marry her," he said.

Woofter's lips curled hate. Murder burned hot in his eyes.

"Clear out, boys," he told his men, "I don't need any witnesses for the remainder of this little ceremony."

Woofter continued to taunt Kirk as his men stalked away. Sam's hands were thonged behind his back. The horse on which Kirk sat was eating grass. It wore no bridle or hackamore to stop it. And as the sorrel took a step after another, nibbling the grass, Kirk was being pulled back onto its rump.

Another step and he would go out on his neck. Woofter rolled a cigarette, watching with torturing amusement, jeering his victim with derisive, fiendish malice. The horse took two steps. Kirk swung off into the air.

"Well, *adios*, Mr. Editor," he heard Woofter's diabolical voice say.

It would take fifteen minutes for Kirk to strangle to death. A terrible way to die! A terrible way to lose. Sam Kirk saw Woofter gallop off.

## CHAPTER X

### *One Man to Die*

GALLOPING down beside the curving track, Nadine heard a horse neigh. Then she saw a puff of dust over the ridge top, and spurred harder toward it, cutting across the low rise of ground at top speed.

From the higher ground she saw that the locomotive was standing still, and started back for the railroad. But that horse neighed again, off to her right; there was more dust. She risked a little wider swing and on still higher ground saw two riders galloping away from the track. Yielding to a frightened urge to see where they were going she topped a ridge. And saw, off to her right, a man's body go swinging into the air! Sam Kirk! A low cry of anguish broke from her lips as she saw Woofter riding away from the doomed man. Nadine almost stood her horse on its hind legs, in swinging it back out of Woofter's sight. Then she raced her horse along below the ridge crest.

"God, let him stand it another minute!" she moaned.

Desperation, though, caused her to break over the ridge earlier than she should have done, and saw that down on the left of the ridge a bunch of men had her father tied to a tree. Nadine knew what that meant. Woofter had turned against her father! Meant to use him somehow. And Woofter was riding toward his men now.

Somebody shouted as they saw Nadine, and four men spurred out to intercept her.

"Hey come back here!" Woofter yelled at them. To Nadine he shouted: "Go ahead, cut Kirk down! But the moment he drops, a bullet crashes through your father's heart. If I've got to deal with you that way, I can!"

Nadine kept her horse on the gallop. She didn't believe Woofter would carry out such a threat against a man so prominent as her father. The men about the tree cleared away, so she could see Woofter and her father plainly. Woofter had a gun pointed at Graham's breast.

It seemed utterly unthinkable for him to murder her father like that. But in a flash Nadine took into ac-

count the man's ruthlessness. Woofter had lost prestige in town, if nothing else. He was more or less fighting with his back to the wall. It might be that he would stop at nothing to regain his lost ground. He might kill her father! Hot tears scalded Nadine's cheeks as she thought of her crippled dad watching out of those blue eyes of his that could be so tender with her. Would he be wondering now if his daughter would choose to save Sam Kirk instead of him?

For Nadine it was the most terrible moment in all the vicious swirl of events for the past forty hours. Her father? Or the man she would die for? There was no hope of going to one, then the other. Woofter would never let her get near Kirk, once she had yielded to his authority. She went on down the ridge for a dozen jumps, during the seconds it took her to make her desperate decision.

Then came a turning factor. Breaking onto high ground to the south were five men. Grey-haired Governor Drayson with four men passengers from the train. The governor, at last suspicious and troubled, had brought the train to a sec-

ond halt down the track and turned back, to see for himself what Woofter was up to.

"Look!" Nadine screamed at Woofter. "You don't dare pull that trigger now."

She believed that and went dashing on to Sam Kirk, fighting her horse with spurs and rope at every jump. Five seconds, even one second might mean the difference between life and death.

She ploughed her heaving mount to a halt beside Kirk, leaped off, threw her arms about his legs and lifted his weight off his neck. She tried to get him down but it was all she could do to hold him up. She could't reach his neck to untie the rope.

AS Nadine rushed away to Sam Kirk, Woofter turned to Graham, pulled out a big knife and cut the rancher's thongs.

"I never meant to harm you, L. K.," he assured the cowman. "Just wanted to show you that your daughter thinks more of a rustler enemy of yours than she does of you. Come on, let's see that Sam Kirk keeps on swinging, in spite of what that fool girl says or does."

Crafty as ever, Woofter was trying now to work his way out of his tightening entanglements. Coolly he swung onto his horse and called to his men.

"Come on, boys! We're going to finish Sam Kirk off. Even the governor has come back to witness it for us!"

Woofter sent his horse into a gallop across the ridge, his men trailing out after him. But L. K. Graham did not follow. Instead, he hobbled to the mount, got into saddle and rushed to meet Governor Drayson.

"Governor," he said, "I've been dead wrong. Woofter's the smoothest rascal I ever laid eyes on."

"Well, I got suspicious myself and came back," Drayson declared. "What's Woofter up to now!"

"Hangin' Kirk."

"We've got to stop that, Graham!" the governor cried anxiously. "The lowest scoundrel on earth deserves his fair hearing. As governor I won't stand for lynching!"

"If we can stop it," Graham said, with a dubious shake of the head.

He had good reason for his skepticism. Woofter still had the man power and only one of the men with Drayson had a gun.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Noose Judgment*

SEEING the riders coming on, Nadine let escape a low whimper of dismay. The next moment, though, her Smith and Wesson was in her one hand while she held Kirk up with the other, an unconscious Kirk now.

Anguish and sheer desperation steeled her heart as she waited for Woofter to get in close range. She meant to kill him if his henchmen shot her down the next moment. She knew now that these men were only his picked hirelings, not in reality her father's cowboys. Most of the old Saddle B cowboys had gone since Woofter had been taking an active hand in the ranch's affairs.

"Hey, there, men!" came Governor Drayson's lusty shout from the ridge top. "Don't you touch Kirk! This state is for fair trials! I'll use the state militia to run down every man that helps lynch Kirk."

It was one thing for Woofter's gang to shoot down opposing range riders but quite another when the governor threatened to hunt them down with an army.

"Come on, boys!" Woofter urged angrily. "Let's riddle Kirk with bullets and then talk back to that fool governor."

But the men hesitated. Paid killers as they were, they sensed that Woofter's time was up. Two of them turned their horses' noses to the south. That way lay the Mexican border. Four others followed the example.

At this critical point, Kirk stirred, tried to cry out through a throat barely recovering from its terrible punishment.

An inspiration flashed to Nadine. She turned her six-shooter upwards, and fired at Kirk's rope. So shaky was she, though, that she only cut the rope a little.

Woofter let out an enraged snarl. He, too, knew now that his fight was lost. All his ambitions had been blasted by this cowboy and the girl trying to save him. Stark rage overpowered Woofter. With a maddened oath, he came rushing down upon Nadine and Kirk.

Nadine was terrified. She didn't dare risk her shaky hand against that demon of the saddle, for Woofter was nothing less now; bent on murder and revenge. He would trust later to shrewd lawyers and money to free him of the consequences.

Nadine let Kirk swing down, clawing frantically at the ropes binding his hands. She tore them loose and thrust her six-shooter into them. Grabbing his legs again she lifted his weight off his neck.

"Get him, Sam!" she cried in wailing plea.

Kirk was trying. Woofter was almost upon him, gun blazing. But as Kirk fired back his blurred vision made him miss. Woofter fired at only ten feet distance. He couldn't miss. The bullet stung hot through Kirk's right side.

Sam Kirk whipped his gun again on that dark object he saw through the blurry haze, triggered frenziedly. His eyes were clearing a little. He saw Woofter still in the saddle.

Woofter had been hit, though. Still he was whirling his horse to make this a finish fight. His bullet raked Kirk's neck and this time the cowboy took one second longer to aim. As his hammer fell he saw Woofter plunge headlong from the back of his prancing horse.

L. K. Graham himself dashed in; helped Nadine get Kirk onto the

ground. And Graham merely stuck out his hand to Sam Kirk.

"I hope after this, Sam," he said humbly, "I kin pick my pardners with a little better judgment."

"I wonder," Kirk suggested, "if yore daughter could do any better job pickin' her pard for a weddin'."

"Sam," Nadine asked earnestly, tears in her eyes, "would you give me a chance to make a second choice?"

"Never!" he vowed. "Yuh mightn't pick me, and it's jest *got* to be me."

He gripped her into his arms. And this time there was surrender in the way she let him crush her trembling lips to his.

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

# ANGEL OF THE RANGE

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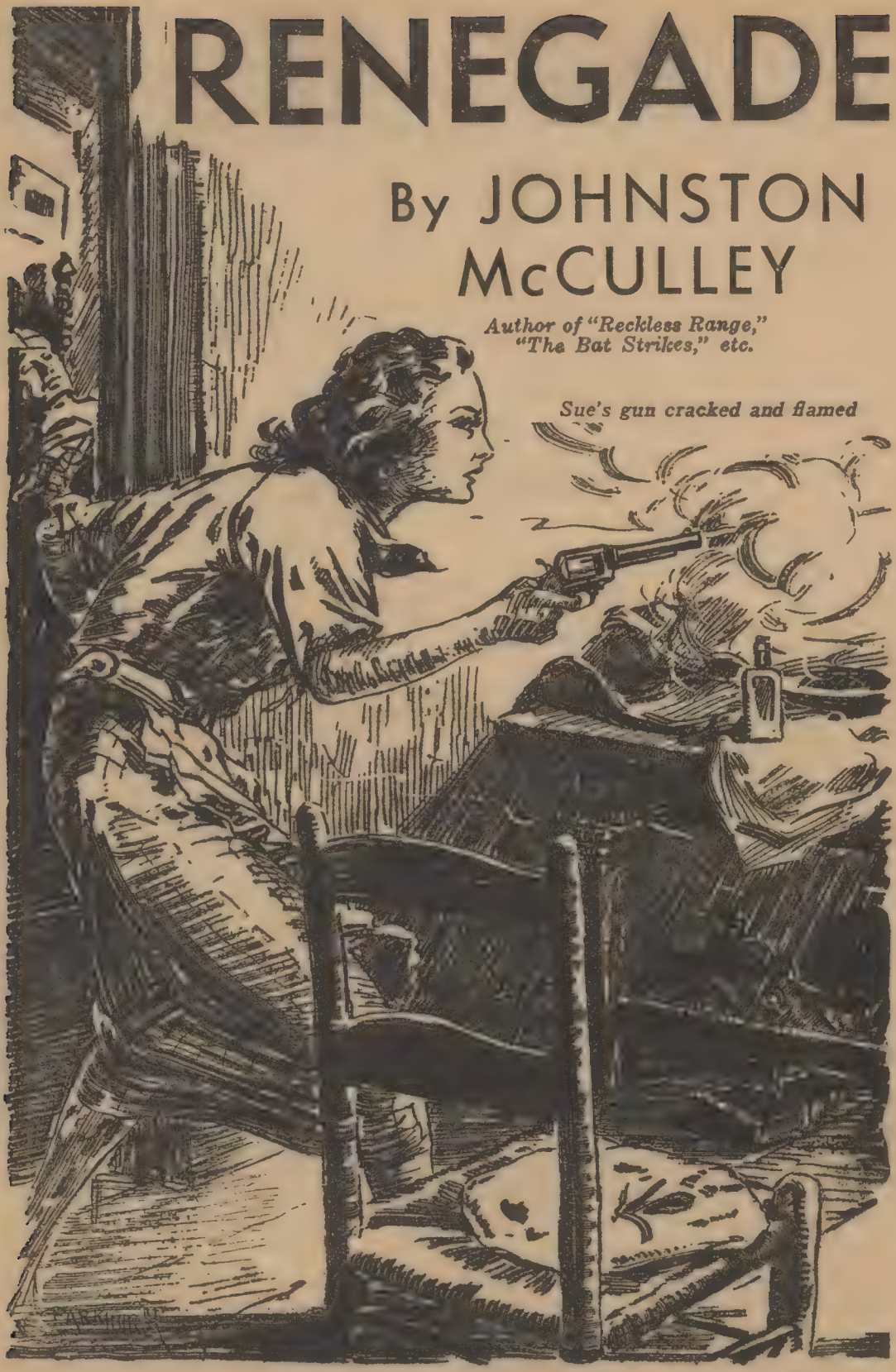


*Sue's gun cracked and flamed*

Romance Verges on Destruction When

# RIDER

## CHAPTER I

### *The Posse*

DISTANT gunfire came down the wind from the direction of the rocky canyon. Single shots, small volleys, once a brisk fusillade.

A battle was being fought somewhere up in the rocky canyon. Men were trying desperately to kill one another; men were dying and groaning with pain up there in the hot rocks.

Sue Larcher shuddered as she listened to the distant gunfire. She could not understand this wild violence. Reared in a strait-laced New England village where a fist fight was considered brutality she never had believed the day would come when she would hear guns barking as men fought to the death.

She was standing on the wide porch in front of her uncle's adobe house. The rushing hot wind blew her brown hair away from her white cheeks. It blew the smarting tears from her eyes, the sounds of battle seemed to strike into her heart.

*A Complete Novelette of Outlaw Love*

## Sue Staves Off a Cottonwood Shindig!

Dave Darmon was there, she knew. He was in the thick of it, and might be hurt or killed. He had felt it his duty to go with the posse which was trying to run down the outlaw band which had been terrorizing the country.

Sue had tried to prevent him. She had tried to explain that there were officers of the law for such work. And the outlaws had not been rustling cattle or stealing horses. So Darmon, the foreman of a cattle spread, was not in honor bound to ride with the posse.

But Darmon had thought differently about it. Every honest citizen should be out after the outlaws, he had said. That they had not rustled cattle or stolen horses did not mean they would not do so tomorrow if not exterminated.

They had almost quarreled about it—and it would have been silly for them to quarrel over anything, Sue thought. They loved each other too much for that. And their love was so fine and true, Sue believed, that it could not be wrecked by the trivial details of everyday existence.

Sue was worried. A rider had gone past two hours before, and had reported that the posse was closing in on the bandits.

"They'll catch up with 'em in the rocky canyon, 'less they make a git-away into the higher hills," the rider had said. "The boys are chasin' four of 'em, a hombre told me."

She heard another burst of gunfire, and clutched the porch post until her knuckles were white. Her uncle, coming out of the house, patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"Now, Sue, don't you be worryin' too much," he advised.

"But Dave may be there, Uncle Henry."

"More'n likely he is, honey. That band of outlaws has made the folks hereabouts mighty mad. They're nothin' but low, cowardly, sneakin', thievin', murderin' hounds."

"The law—" she hinted.

"Hasn't been able to do anything. The sheriff can't be everywhere at once. Try to understand, honey, that the posse is the law. And that quarrelin' and fightin' and even killin' has been necessary since the world began. Some men try to ride over the rights of others, then there's trouble."

"If Dave—"

"Now, now! Dave'll take care of himself. Bein' the foreman of the Lazy B outfit, he had to take some of his punchers and ride with the posse. It'd have looked mighty funny if he hadn't."

"I—I suppose so," she agreed.

"And don't go wastin' sympathy on that outlaw gang. Probably all of 'em are unhung murderers. You've got to get used to this country and its customs, Sue! Life's still pretty raw here."

"I've been here a year, Uncle Henry, but—"

"Shucks! You're turnin' into a real Westerner fast. When I came here ten years ago, I was the rankest kind of a tenderfoot. A hombre told me a sidewinder was a steamboat with paddles on its sides, and I didn't learn for a month that a sidewinder is a rattler, and that there ain't runnin' water enough in the whole country to float a chip. But I learned. So'll you. Don't let any crazy ideas spoil what's between you and Dave."

HER uncle went back into the house, but Sue remained at the corner of the porch listening, in an agony of uncertainty. If Dave Darmon *had* been hurt—

Sue's uncle, a physician with fine reputation and a good practice, had been compelled to come west ten years before because of ill health. He had money enough to build this sprawling adobe house and live comfortably. His health had improved, and there came a day when he knew

it would be safe for him to return East.

But he had not returned. He had made a new place for himself in the world, and was content. He had made friends with the Navajos, had doctored them and studied them. He was preparing a book on their tribal history and customs.

When Sue Larcher had been left an orphan her uncle had sent for her. Never would she forget her first sight of this semi-desert country from the car window. She had hated it before she got off at the little station in a sea of sagebrush and rocks, to be met by her uncle with the buckboard and make the thirty-mile drive through the barren red hills.

But she soon learned that everything in this new world was as interesting as it was strange. She learned that a desert can be beautiful.

She was liked by the Navajos, got to look on them as children who ran to her uncle and to her with their hurts and troubles, and learned to speak some of their language.

Other people came to the house. Ranchmen and cowboys drifted by, generally stopped for a meal and an hour of gossip and then rode on. Donald McTavish, a pioneer who had a big ranch a few miles away, was a frequent visitor. And Dave Darmon, the foreman of the big Lazy B outfit, rode out of the sunset one day and straight into Sue's heart.

He had supplied for Sue the romance for which she had starved in New England. He was tall, lithe, generally smiling, strong and capable, gentle but firm in handling men.

Darmon was to have a small spread of his own that autumn, then they would be married. Only one thing caused a tiny, fleecy cloud to sweep across and mar the perfect blue of their heaven—both Sue and Dave Darmon were stubborn mules at times.

But they made a practice of avoiding real quarrels. When they saw that fleecy cloud they had sense enough to heed its warning. They had come to a near clash occasionally only over small things. Their wills never had been opposed in things of any importance.

"Uncle Henry!" Sue called, sharply, shading her eyes with her hands against the sun glare. "Rider coming."

In the far distance, a rider was following the trail to the house. He was coming from the direction of the rocky canyon, and might have news.

THE rider disappeared in a depression, and when he came into view again Sue gave a cry of alarm. He was bending forward in his saddle, clutching the saddle-horn. His hat was gone and he swayed sickeningly.

"Uncle Henry, he's hurt!" Sue cried.

"Looks like it," her uncle said from beside her now. "I'll get ready for him."

Her uncle had a sort of small surgery there, in the adobe house; even an old operating table. He made swift preparations now for treating gunshot wounds for he guessed that was what he would find.

When he returned to the porch he could see that the rider was having trouble keeping in the saddle. Dr. Larcher hurried down the porch steps with Sue at his heels. The doctor seized the horse's reins.

The rider slipped out of the saddle. He was a stranger to both Sue and her uncle.

But many men they did not know were riding with the posse—men from a distant town where a bank and store had been robbed and four of the townsmen killed during a fight.

The wounded man kept his feet by clutching the saddle. Caked blood was on his clothes, and blood was oozing from a wound in his back.

"Got—shot," he gasped. "Tried—to follow—trail—"

"We'll fix you up," Doc Larcher said.

But the wounded man was unable to answer. His head dropped forward, and he sagged in Doc Larcher's arms, unconscious.

## CHAPTER II

### *Defiance*

THEY carried him into the house, leaving his horse standing with reins trailing. Sue had helped her uncle many times with injured Navajos, and was something of a nurse by now, so she could aid expertly. They got the wounded man on the operating table and cut away some of his clothes.

"Shot in the back," Larcher said. "He's lost a lot of blood."

Soon, still unconscious, the patient was stretched on a couch at one side of the room. Doc Larcher had done all he could for the moment. He began cleaning up, and Sue hurried out to the porch again. Her wild cry brought her uncle out.

More riders, a half dozen of them were galloping furiously toward the house with a cloud of dust lifting behind them. Dave Darmon was in the lead on his big sorrel. He waved his sombrero in his usual greeting.

The riders skidded to a stop and sprang from saddles. Some of them whipped guns from holsters. They were hot, dusty, and Sue had never seen men who looked so grim and determined.

"Managed to get here, did he?" Dave Darmon barked.

"Dave!" Sue cried. "I'm so glad you're here—that you're all right. A wounded man rode in—shot in the back. He lost consciousness before he could tell us—"

"It's a strange brand on the hombre's hoss, Dave," one of the men called.

"Came from over the hills, probably," Dave Darmon broke in.

"Who is he, Dave?" Sue asked.

"One of the outlaws. Yuh're lucky he was hurt bad and passed out. He mighta held you and yore uncle and made a dicker with us to git away. We got four of 'em cornered, but one dodged us. They got a couple of our boys, too, includin' the deputy sheriff. We was a little late gittin' on this hombre's trail, but we got him now!"

"He's badly wounded, Dave," Doc Larcher said. "I'll do my best, but—"

"We'll spare yuh a lot of trouble, Doc," Dave interrupted. "Git the hombre out, boys."

"Dave! What are you going to do?" Sue's face suddenly held an expression of terror.

"Goin' to give him the rope," Darmon gritted. "What else?"

"You can't do such a thing Dave! He's wounded, unconscious, helpless."

"He's a thievin', murderin' houn' dog!" Darmon replied grimly.

This was a Dave Darmon Sue never had seen before—a man enraged, murderous, a typical man of the range helping other men exterminate a human rattlesnake. In that moment, Sue saw Dave Darmon as a primitive man fighting his enemy ruthlessly, not as a soft-spoken sweetheart.

She clutched his arm. "You mean you'd take this unconscious man out and hang him—murder him?" she demanded.

"We string up such in this country."

"If he's an outlaw, wait till he gets well enough, then hand him over to the law," she said.

He looked at her dumfounded.

"Sue! Don't yuh understand? This man is a murderin' outlaw."

"How do you know he is?"

"Why—well, he's a stranger. He come from the canyon—and he's wounded. This his gun?"

"Yes," Doc Larcher said. "He dropped it."

Darmon swiftly examined the weapon. "Hum—every shot's been fired. At us, Sue—mebbe at me. Need any more evidence?"

"Oh, so many mistakes can be made! Anyhow, he's unconscious, and what you're thinking of—it'd be murder."

"Let me look at him," Darmon said shortly and with Sue and Doc Larcher went to the room where the unconscious wounded man was stretched on the couch.

Darmon shrugged. "His clothes don't tell anything," he said. "What's this?"

"A money belt I took off him," Doc Larcher said.

Darmon examined it quickly, and whistled. "Two thousand dollars in currency!" he said. "Ever see an honest man pack that much in this country? Well, that settles it! We'll take the hombre off yore hands, Doc."

SUE faced him, head up, eyes blazing, her body rigid, fists clenched at her sides. "You're not going to take this man out and hang him, Dave Darmon!"

"But it's got to be done, Sue!"

"Even if you *knew* he was one of the outlaws I'd not let you do it!" she stormed. "And you're *not* sure! He may be an innocent stranger."

"No innocent stranger was ridin' around the canyon this afternoon," Darmon snapped. "What's more we saw one of the gang, wounded, climb into his saddle. When he got up into the rocks, he was gone. Then we saw him in the distance, makin' for here." He strode to the door and called: "Come in here and git this hombre!"

He came back with two of the men—to find Sue Larcher standing in the doorway with a leveled six-gun.

"You're not going to take this unconscious man out and hang him!" she declared, her eyes aflame.

"Now, Sue—"

"You know how I can shoot, Dave; you've often joked about what a good markswoman I am. I'd hate to have to shoot a man, Dave—to shoot you!"

"You crazy?"

"I'll shoot, Dave, if you try to take this man out of the room! I mean it!"

"She shore does, from the looks of her," one of the men behind Darmon said.

Dave Darmon knew she did mean it.

And with her New England conscience she thought she was fighting for the right, in defense of a human life, and her natural stubbornness became like a rock wall with such an incentive.

"Sue, honey, yuh don't understand!" Darmon pleaded. "This man's a killer."

"He's wounded, and under a doctor's care," she snapped. "And you'll not even wait till he regains consciousness and can explain himself."

"He'd only spout a lot of lies."

"Dave!" Sue's voice was imploring. "Can't you see what this will do to us? Think of that, if it means anything to you. If you did this I—I never could marry you, Dave. It'd kill all the love I have for you. I'd want never to see you again."

"Say!" one of the men growled, "Are we goin' to let a gal keep us from stringin' up this hombre? Let's git on with it, Dave."

Sue's gun cracked and flamed, and the man's hat spun from his head, the bullet struck the adobe wall screaming as it ricocheted.

"Take off your hat when you come into my uncle's house," Sue said.

The men backed away hastily as the others came running in from outside, thinking the wounded man had opened fire.

"Get out! Sue Larcher cried. "That means you, too, Dave. You won't take an unconscious man out of this house and murder him without a shred of evidence."

Dave Darmon's eyes blazed. "If that's the way yuh look at it—" he began.

"That's the way I look at it, Dave Darmon."

"The murderin' houn' musta made a right strong impression on yuh."

"Dave!"

"Mebbe yuh've met him before. He come ridin' right here when he got in trouble, I notice." Jealousy was mixed with stubbornness now. He whirled on Sue's uncle. "How about this business, Doc?"

"I can't do anything about it, Dave," Larcher said. "I'm a physician, and this man is under my care. Maybe Sue's right. Let me get this man in condition to talk, and send word to the sheriff—"

"Have it yore own way, now," Dave Darmon said, and shrugged. "If you folks want to harbor and protect an outlaw, it's yore business. Yuh'll soon find out what the people hereabouts think of it. And you kin bet we'll make shore he don't git away."

"He may not even live," Doc Larcher said.

"Anyhow, we'll be watchin'. Nobody's goin' to sneak him out, put him into a saddle and let him ride away."

He turned angrily and gestured a command to his men, and they started to leave.

"Dave—" Sue called.

But he stalked on without looking at her, without answering, and she saw him get into the saddle and ride away toward the Lazy B.

## CHAPTER III

### *Night Attack*

SUE'S eyes were moist an instant, but she brushed away the tears, and a look of defiance came into her face.

"Dave's a stubborn mule!" she declared, suddenly.

"Maybe—" her uncle began.

She whirled to face him. "Did you want them to take an unconscious man out and—"

"Oh, 'course not!" Doc Larcher said. "Anyhow, we've got to go through with it now. We've started somethin', and there's a little mule in all Larchers—more in some than in others." He gave her a sideward glance.

"You attend to your patient, Uncle Henry," she said. "I'll watch."

"I know those hombres," Doc Larcher told her. "They'll prob'ly try to slip here durin' the night and get him. But I've got plenty of Navajo friends, and I'll fix it so there won't be any slippin' up on us at night."

Doc examined his patient, shook his head, and went out to take saddle and bridle off the wounded man's horse and turn the animal into the little corral.

Then Doc gathered fuel and built a little fire off to one side, carried a wet blanket to it, and began making smoke signals as the Navajos had taught him. That would bring him the help he needed.

Sue sat beside the wounded man, studying him. He was not more than twenty-five, she judged; rather good-looking, and did not look as she had supposed an outlaw and killer should look.

She regretted her quarrel with Darmon, but kept telling herself she had been right. She'd *had* to protect this man, whoever he was, until he could have a fair trial. Surely

Dave Darmon would not let this difference wreck their happiness, though she had made him look rather small.

The wounded man began tossing and muttering. Sue called her uncle, who gave a restorative. The man opened his eyes and gulped a little water and whiskey.

"YOU'VE been badly hurt," Sue told him. "You rode to our—"

"I—I remember."

"What happened to you?"

"Was ridin'—through canyon," he muttered. "Somebody—shot me. Didn't see—who. I emptied—gun—saw this place—"

"Who are you?" Doc asked.

"Sam—Gray."

"Where were you travelin'?"

"To— Oh, I—I don't remember."

"Want us to let anybody know about you bein' hurt? I'll have an Indian runner—"

"Somebody—but can't remember," the man on the couch muttered.

"We found a lot of money in your money-belt," Doc told him. "I'm keepin' it safe for you. It's a lot of cash for a man to be carryin' in this country."

"It's—my money," Sam Gray declared.

"Some men have been here—say you're an outlaw," Sue informed him, watching him closely. "They wanted to hang you."

"Me? Outlaw? Shucks! I—I'm all right."

He did not say any more, though Doc knew he could have spoken had he wished to do so. Doc and Sue left him and went out on the porch.

"Maybe Dave's right," Doc said, looking thoughtful. "This man says he can't remember where he was going, or who his friends are, and that's rot. And all that money makes it look—"

"Uncle Henry! You won't hand him over to—"

"Don't worry. We'll take care of him and protect him until the sheriff can have his say."

Navajos began arriving in response to the smoke signals, some afoot and some on their ponies. Doc explained the situation, and said he did not want them to take part in any trouble. But he wanted them to watch during the night, to keep grim and determined men from creeping up and taking the wounded man away.

The Navajos scattered in the rocks and brush, where they could not be seen, but from where they could watch. Doc knew they could see in the night like owls, and their keen ears could detect the approach of anybody from afar.

When night came, Doc gave his patient something to induce painless sleep and went to bed, as did Sue. A cordon of watchful Navajos around the place insured them against surprise. In the middle of the night, one of the Navajos crept in from the porch and shook Doc Larcher awake.

"Riders come," the Navajo grunted.

Doc got up quickly and awakened Sue. The Navajo went back to the porch to stand beside the front door. From out in the night came the mournful cry of a bird; repeated with variations.

"Three men come," the Navajo reported to Doc. "Leave ponies and come on foot."

"That'll be Dave and a couple of his Lazy B riders, I reckon," Doc said. "We'll put a couple of bullets over their heads to show them we're awake and watchin'."

Not far from the house, a boot scraped rock. Doc Larcher's gun barked, flame split the night, and a bullet went screaming out into the open. Sue, too, fired into the air. Then they jumped back into the house.

But, unexpectedly, guns blazed out there in the night. Bullets thudded against the building, one ripped

through the door and struck a wall.

"Flat on the floor!" Doc barked. "This is goin' too far, dang it! They could have hurt us, shootin' like that. For a cent, I'd blaze away straight at 'em."

"Don't!" Sue cried. "You might hurt Dave."

"Well, by time! What was *he* tryin' to do to us!"

"I'll bet he never did that shooting, Uncle Henry. And if his men did, they're probably hearing from Dave about it right this minute."

Again guns cracked outside. Two more bullets struck the house. Doc jerked the door open and emptied his gun as fast as he could work it, but firing high.

"I'll have somethin' to say to that Dave Darmon if he ever shows his face around here again," Doc declared, angrily.

"Maybe it wasn't Dave," Sue said.

"Who else would it be? Thought he'd sneak in and get the wounded man. Mad 'cause he found us watching, and started shootin'. Just a no-good cowboy! You're well rid of him."

"But I—I don't want to be well rid of him, Uncle Henry!" Sue gasped. "And it's not like Dave to shoot at the house like that."

"A few hours ago you were callin' him a hard-hearted brute 'cause he wanted to string up an outlaw. Now you think he's too ladylike to shoot at a house."

The Navajo, who had slipped quietly out, came back again into the room.

"Three men—get horses, go away," he reported. "Ride toward Lazy B ranch."

"There you are!" Doc said. "Just wait till I see that Dave Darmon again! Full to the gills with cheap liquor, maybe."

"But Dave doesn't drink—not hardly ever," Sue defended.

"If he wasn't drunk, makes it all the worse!"

"If I thought he did a thing like that—" she began.

"Let his danged temper get away with him," Doc declared. "Bloodthirsty young rapscallion!"

## CHAPTER IV

### *Clever Girl*

IN the morning, the wounded man was conscious again, and Doc told Sue he had a chance to live if complications did not occur. He neglected to mention that one of the possible complications was a rope.

Doc had sent some of the Navajos trailing, and expected a report before the sun was high overhead.

"Might know more about this wounded hombre when they come back," Doc told Sue. "Navajos can look at the ground and tell what happened a month ago."

A couple of hours after sunup, Dave Darmon came riding toward the house with one of his men. Doc and Sue received him on the front porch, and Doc had his gun buckled on.

"You've got a nerve to come driftin' in here, after what happened last night," Doc said.

"You mean me gittin' sore 'cause you and Sue wouldn't let us take that man away?"

"I mean when you came sneakin' around here in the dark with two of your waddies. We fired a couple of shots in the air to let you know we were on guard. And what did you do? Opened up on the house and shot right at it! One of your bullets almost hit Sue!"

"Hey, wait!" Darmon barked. "I wasn't around here last night!"

"Who else could it have been?" Doc snapped at him.

"Yes!" Sue echoed. "I'd be man enough not to lie about it, Dave."

"Let me tell you somethin', Miss

Larcher!" Darmon howled. "I've never found it necessary to lie yet to cover up any of my doin's, and I ain't startin' now. I wasn't near here last night! I can prove I was at the ranch all night."

"Oh, Dave, I just knew it wasn't you!" Sue cried.

"Well, I'll be—" Doc sat down hard.

"What happened?" Darmon demanded.

Doc told him.

"Plain enough," Dave Darmon said. "Some outlaw came here to rescue their pardner. Mebbe yuh'll believe now that feller was one of the four tryin' to kill us yesterday. When you opened up on these men last night they probably thought some of the posse was here, and made a quick gitaway. Plain enough now, Doc. Yuh're harborin' an outlaw."

Sue flared up again. "Uncle Henry is only taking care of a wounded man as a physician has a right to do! The sheriff can have him as soon as he can be moved, but no bunch of cowboy murderers are going to have him while he's helpless!"

Darmon turned his back on her. "Has the hombre said anything?" he asked Doc Larcher.

"He says his name is Sam Gray, that the money is his own, and that he can't remember where he was travelin' or who his friends are."

"Yeah?" Darmon smiled oddly. "Doc, I wish yuh'd do somethin' about Sue. Make her see this thing our way."

"No use tryin' that, Dave. She's almost as stubborn as you. Best way, as I see it, is for you to notify the sheriff."

"He's been notified. I sent a rider. But we generally 'tend to little things like this ourselves. Yuh're makin' enemies by this, Doc, I'm warnin' yuh. The ranchmen don't like it much."

"But, suppose this man is innocent?"

"Heck! You think he is?"

"Well, not exactly."

"There yuh are!"

"Anyhow, it's too late now to do as you wish, Dave. He's bad hurt—"

"You'd pet a rattlesnake," Darmon put in.

"Oh, turn him over to the sheriff and let it go at that!" Doc said. "You and Sue patch up your little spat—"

"I reckon we never kin do that."

"Don't be a fool!" Doc Larcher could get riled at times. "Dang me if I ever saw such stubborn critters!"

ONE of the Navajos came rushing up bareback on his pony and slid off.

"Well?" Doc asked him.

"Men trail. Find where outlaws make fight. One outlaw get away, go down to canyon floor."

"There!" Darmon roared. "Need any more proof, Doc?"

"But him not come here," the Navajo said. "Him circle back through rocks. Hide while posse ride past. We findum dead and horse stand by him."

"What?" Darmon yelped.

"Other man come here," the Navajo's monotone went on. "Man who come here ride straight through canyon, not come from outlaws."

"See?" Sue cried. "He isn't an outlaw at all. And you'd have hung him!"

"I'll shore look into this," Dave Darmon said.

He mounted and rode hurriedly away with his man, taking the Navajo along with them. Sue's eyes were glistening.

"So this Sam Gray has been telling the truth!" she said. "And Dave would have — Uncle Henry, I — I never want to see him again!"

"I'm about to the point where I don't want to ever see either of you again," Doc blustered. "Dang it, Sue,

you've got to look at this Dave's way, too. Don't be in too big a hurry. Maybe there were five outlaws 'stead of four, and one's dead up in the rocks, but this man—he may have been one of the band. You wait till we're sure about it."

It was almost sunset when Dave Darmon returned. He dismounted and went into the house.

"I want to talk to this hombre," he said.

"That's fair enough, Dave," Doc replied. "But—"

"Oh, I'll promise you and Sue not to empty my gun into him or try to take him away, now."

THE three went into the room where the wounded man was stretched on the couch. Darmon sat down beside him.

"So your name's Sam Gray, huh?" Darmon asked. "What yuh doin' in this part of the country?"

"I—I can't remember."

"Where'd you come from? We don't know the brand on yore hoss."

"I—I can't remember that, either. I've tried—but I jest can't remember."

"That wad of money yuh was totin'—"

"That's mine—mine!"

"So yuh kin remember that much, kin yuh? Yuh'd better open up and tell the truth or, wounded or not—"

They had not heard the three riders approach. And the few Navajos who remained in the vicinity watching did not warn. They thought those in the house could see the horsemen, who rode up slowly with nothing suspicious in their actions.

Without making any noise, the men went up on the porch, leaving their mounts ground-hitched. They went through the open front door, and guns suddenly were snapped out of their holsters. Cautiously they approached to the door of the little room Doc used as a surgery.

"Get 'em up, everybody!" a coarse voice barked.

Darmon and the others whirled quickly to find themselves menaced by guns in the hands of three men who had neckcloths pulled up over their faces to their eyes as masks.

"Wh-what—" Darmon stammered.

"We heard yuh had a captured outlaw here, and thought we'd drop in and have a look at him," one of the three replied. "He might be a friend of ours. We're feelin' right kindly toward you folks for carin' for him."

The speaker strode forward, waving the three back against the wall. A second man got Darmon's guns. The third was watching Doc and Sue closely.

The leader of the trio bent over the wounded man on the couch.

"Why, this—this hombre—we don't know him," he declared. "We've had our trouble for nothin'."

"Ain't he yore friend?" Darmon asked.

"Never saw him before. He's shot up some, huh? Musta got it accidental durin' the ruckus."

"He was ridin' a black hoss—"

"Not a black hoss in our bunch," the outlaw said. "Well, hope the hombre gits well. We shore went to a lot of trouble to have a look at him. Now, we'd like to know who done all that shootin' when we come visitin' last night."

"So it was you!" Sue cried.

"I reckon. Some of that damned posse spendin' the night here, huh? And Navajos watchin'." He looked at Dave Darmon "Who are you, hombre?"

"Me? I'm a cowpuncher."

"If I thought you'd been with that posse—"

"How about some grub?" one of the others broke in. "It's comin' on night, and we ain't been eatin' right and reg'lar."

"An idea!" their leader agreed. "We'll herd this bunch into the

kitchen, tie up the two men, and make the girl git us some eats."

"We—we've had supper," Sue said, quickly. "But there's a pot of stew I can warm up in a few minutes, and coffee, and maybe some apple pie."

"Sounds like a right fine meal," the outlaw leader said. "You two gents march, hands held high. We'll go to the kitchen. You step right along, too, Miss."

"Just—just a moment—till I attend to the patient," Sue said.

Doc's eyes narrowed. The patient did not claim her attention just then. But Sue picked up a spoon, took down a small bottle from a shelf, and filled the spoon. She went over to the man on the couch.

"Take this, then drink some water," she said.

The patient obeyed listlessly. Doc Larcher, standing against the wall with his hands held high above his head, was doing some wondering. What Sue had given the patient was a harmless sodium which would do him neither good nor ill. What was it about?

Then, he saw.

"Be ready in a second," Sue said.

She hurried back to the corner and replaced the vial on the shelf—and as she turned to join them she clutched another vial and slipped it into the pocket of her apron.

## CHAPTER V

### *Without a Struggle*

HELPLESS beneath the outlaws' guns, Doc Larcher and Dave Darmon marched into the kitchen with their hands held high. One of the outlaws bound Doc to a chair with a lariat, while another, gun ready, watched Darmon and the girl.

"Ain't any sense of handlin' us like this," the foreman complained.

"Takin' no chances," the leader said. "Ben, keep glancing through that window. Might be some of them cussed possemen hereabouts yet."

Doc Larcher was watching Sue while the two men lashed the fuming Darmon to another chair. It would be suicide for him to make a hostile move.

Sue stirred up the fire and put more fuel into the stove. She put the pot of savory stew over the fire, and got coffee started. The three outlaws were already seated at the kitchen table.

"Three of us left," the leader said. "But that's enough. We're goin' back to the hills and do some recruitin', and then we're comin' over here and make this county pay plenty for treatin' the boys rough."

Fussing nervously about, Sue cut bread and put it on the table, went back to the stove and stirred the stew. A swift glance showed one of the outlaws glancing through the window and the other two looking at Doc and the captured Darmon.

Her hand went into her apron pocket and came out, bringing the little bottle. She had uncorked it in her pocket. She dumped the contents of the bottle into the stew, and put the empty vial into her pocket again.

"Yuh aimin' to starve us to death?" one of the outlaws howled at her.

"The—the coffee isn't ready."

"Come on with that stew, and we kin get at the coffee later."

Sue fought to control her nervousness. She filled a plate with the stew and put it on the table. One of the men grasped a spoon and began eating ravenously. Sue filled two other plates for the other outlaws. She turned back quickly to cut a pie.

"Danged good stew," one of the outlaws praised.

Sue saw that Doc was trying to flash some sort of signal to her, but she could not understand what he meant.

"More stew!" one of the outlaws howled. "It—it's—mighty good—"

His spoon clattered in his plate. Strength seemed to go from his body. He tried to get out of his chair, and crashed to the floor.

"What's the matter, Ben?" one of the others asked sharply. "I'll help him, Sid. You look through the window—"

But Sid got to his feet, pulling at the collar of his sweat-stained shirt, gasping.

"That—that stew—" he gasped.

He tried to claw for his gun, and Sue sensed the peril. If they got the idea something has been wrong with the stew, they would surely commence shooting. As the second man reeled and fell, Sue screamed and hurled herself on the third, tore his gun away and tossed it into a corner.

"Sue! Knife! Cut ropes!" her uncle was howling at her.

She grasped a sharp kitchen knife and cut Dave Darmon's bonds first. He lurched to his feet. He grabbed the ropes, hurled himself on the nearest outlaw and began binding him. One of the others was struggling to his feet, bracing himself against the wall, as Sue cut the ropes which bound her uncle.

Sue turned, screamed. The man against the wall had managed to get a gun from his holster. The girl sprang at him like a tigress as the gun cracked. The bullet burned across her left arm and sent her reeling aside. But the man who had fired it collapsed as Dave Darmon sprang at him.

"Take it easy!" Doc bellowed. "Tie'm up, Dave, but take your time about it. They won't be awake for quite some time. Might never get awake if we don't get busy and save 'em."

"What happened?" Darmon cried.

"Sue dumped a vial of laudanum into that pot of stew. I saw her get it in the other room. Reckon she's takin' to our Western ways some."

"Sue!" Darmon cried, and caught her as she would have fallen.

They helped her to a chair. She was weak and trembling.

"If—if they die—" she panted.

Doc was running for antidotes. There was a clatter of hoofs outside. Dave Darmon sprang to the outlaw who had taken his gun from him and regained the weapon. Somebody shouted, and men came running through the house and into the kitchen.

DARMON lowered the gun. Lazy B cowboys were filling the room.

"One of the Navajos peeked through a window and saw you folks in trouble, hopped his pony and came to the ranch for help," one of the men explained.

"Three of the outlaw gang," Darmon said, waving at them. "Sue doped them and put them out. When Doc fixes them so they won't kick off—"

"We've got a rope on every saddle," a cowboy howled at him.

Sue was on her feet again and at Darmon's side.

"No, you don't!" she cried. "If it hadn't been for me, maybe you'd never had caught them! So you're going to hold them and turn them over to the sheriff!"

"All right," Dave Darmon agreed. "That's the program, boys, I reckon, whether yuh like it or not. Help Doc with these men."

Sue found herself alone with him in the doorway.

"Now, Dave, you see?" she asked. "The wounded man—he isn't an outlaw at all."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, these men said they didn't know him."

"And that fooled yuh?" he asked.

"Don't yuh understand? They recognized him, all right, and he knew them. They said he wasn't one of the band jest to protect him. Prob'ly thought Doc would make him well, then he'd ride away."

"Dave Darmon, you won't admit you're wrong! You're just mule stubborn."

"I'll admit it when I know it," he said.

"I suppose I can trust you to turn these three men over to the sheriff?" she asked, witheringly.

"Said I'd do it, and I will. Sheriff will be here some time tomorrow."

Then he went to help Doc Larcher and the Lazy B punchers get the three outlaws on their feet. They had a difficult time of it. It was after dark before the three were out of danger. Then, weak and sick, they were lashed in their saddles with their wrists tied behind their backs, and taken away toward the Lazy B.

## CHAPTER VI

### *An Amicable Draw*

AFTER they were gone, Sue went in to see the patient.

"My uncle says you're out of danger, that the wound isn't as bad as he thought," she said.

"I'm shore right grateful to you folks," he told her.

"You haven't remembered anything yet—about where you were traveling, or the names of your friends, or where you came from?"

"Mebbe it'll come back to me," Sam Gray replied.

She left him and got ready for bed. Doc Larcher had kept a few of the Navajos to guard, though he anticipated no more trouble. But Sue could not go to sleep. She was thinking that she had nearly killed three men. And she was thinking of Dave Darmon.

This was their first serious quarrel. Possibly it would end everything between them. She could only hope that Darmon, when he learned she had been right, and that this wounded man was not an outlaw, and that if she had let him have his way he would have hanged an innocent man—well, she hoped he would say something then that would settle all this trouble between them.

She sat up straight in bed, for an unusual sound had come to her from the front of the house. Then she heard a scuffle, a sharp cry of pain, a sudden jabbering. Though she hurried into her robe, her uncle was out in the front room ahead of her. The lamp was burning.

Sam Gray had dressed himself and got as far as the front door, but the watchful Navajos had stopped him there.

"What's this mean?" Doc was demanding.

"I—I didn't want to trouble you folks any more," Sam Gray said.

"Eager to get away because you heard the sheriff might get here tomorrow?" Sue asked. "Is that it? So you—you are an outlaw, after all! Dave was right, and I've been wrong, and maybe you've made me lose Dave—"

"I'm not an outlaw!" Sam Gray protested.

He collapsed, and they undressed him and got him back on the couch. Doc gave him something to make him sleep, and he and Sue remained awake the remainder of the night, watching the patient. It was after dawn when he was awake and able to speak to them again.

"I—I'm sorry I caused yuh trouble," he told Doc. "You folks have been so kind—"

"Why don't you tell us the truth about yourself?" Doc Larcher asked.

But Sam Gray closed his eyes and would say nothing more.

It was early when horsemen approached the house. The sheriff had

reached the Lazy B late the night before, and had left there shortly after dawn. Dave Darmon and half a dozen of the Lazy B cowboys were with him.

They dismounted, and Doc Larcher and Sue went out on the porch to make them welcome. But before they could enter the house, two other riders approached from the direction of the canyon, and they waited for them to come up.

One was Donald McTavish, the eccentric old pioneer cattleman. The other was a stranger.

"THIS here's Mr. Weston," McTavish introduced. "Owns a big spread over the hills.

"I think yuh've got my foreman here, wounded," Weston said. "His name's Sam Gray."

"Kin yuh vouch for this Mr. Weston, McTavish?" Dave Darmon asked.

"Shore! Known him for years. We're havin' a business dealin'. You tell 'em, Weston."

Weston grinned. "McTavish wants to get rid of a bunch of yearlin's," he said. "I had an option on 'em. Had to come across with a couple of thousand by a certain time to close the deal, rest on delivery. Sent Sam Gray with the money, 'cause I couldn't come myself jest then. Followed, and didn't find Sam at the McTavish place. Heard about all this, so we rode over. Under the circumstances, McTavish says he'll stick to the deal even if payment is a little late."

"Why didn't yore man Gray tell us all this?" the Lazy B foreman demanded.

"Because," Weston said, "I made Sam promise he wouldn't reveal his business to anybody. Some other gents, gettin' word of it, mighta gone after them yearlin's aud outbid me. Sam Gray was bein' loyal to his boss and his orders, that's all."

They all went inside, where Sam Gray grinned weakly at his employer. Dave Darmon went out on the porch alone. He hesitated only long enough to roll a cigarette, then went slowly down the steps and got into his saddle.

"Dave!"

He glanced up and saw Sue Larcher on the porch. She hurried down the steps and up to his horse. "Aren't you going to stay for another breakfast, with the sheriff and the others?"

"I reckon mebbe yuh ruther I didn't," he told her. "Yuh said I was a stubborn mule."

"You are, Dave," Sue said, then quickly: "And so am I."

"In this here case, yuh was plumb right," he admitted. "It'd have been on my conscience, I reckon—stringin' up an innocent man. But the next time you might be the one that's wrong, huh?"

"Yes," she said. "If there ever is a next time, Dave. How do you want your eggs?"

"Fried hard—'bout six of 'em—and the ham well done."

"Dave! Eggs fried hard aren't good for you, and ham well done—you don't get the flavor!"

"Well, doggone!" he exclaimed, as he got out of the saddle. "So I can't even have my food the way I like it! Go ahead and cook it any old way yuh want to. A man's got to eat. Have your own way—little mule."

"Did—did you ever kiss a mule, Dave?"

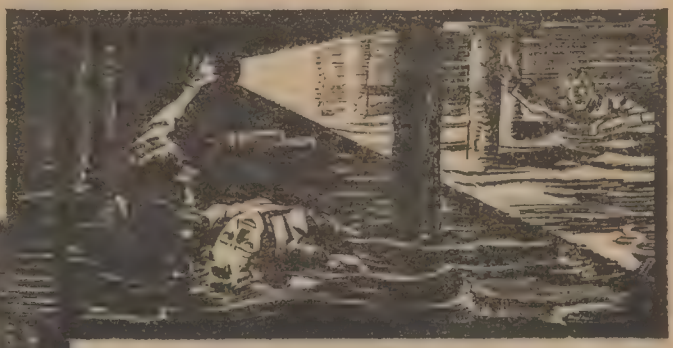
He grinned at her. "It ain't the proper thing, I reckon," he said. "You know any little mule as wants to be kissed?"

Some time later, Doc howled from the front door:

"We're starvin' in here, Sue. We can't live on love like some folks. We want ham and eggs and 'taters. You and Dave will have years for that kind of stuff. But this mornin's breakfast only comes once."

# Black Swirling Water Swept Her Out of Sight.....

## Girl Leaps for Ferryboat and Misses; C. C. C. Rescuers Plunge Among Ice Floes



*Harold Watson of 64 Scholes St. and his pal Joseph Flanagan of 717 Madison St., Brooklyn, N. Y., who were rewarded with C. C. C. Certificates of Valor signed by President Roosevelt.*

"A girl came running down the dock as the boat pulled away. She jumped . . . and missed," writes Harold Watson, "falling into the icy swirling water. Standing as I was on the deck of the ferryboat with my buddy Joe Flanagan, I saw her swept under the pier while those on the dock couldn't tell where she was.

"One man had a flashlight but he didn't know where to shine it . . . I had to have it so I jumped back on the dock and dove after the girl with the flashlight in my mouth. I found her easy enough, but it was so cold in there amongst cakes of floating ice I couldn't do more than just hold her up. It looked like we both would drown . . . I was ready to give up . . . when I realized Joe was shouting at me, saw him swimming toward us towing a life preserver. Thanks to him we got the life preserver under the girl and brought her out from under the dock where soldiers in a life boat pulled us out.

"But if it hadn't been for that flashlight and those *fresh* DATED 'Eveready' batteries that kept the light burning in that icy salt water, there couldn't have been any rescue at all, for we never could have found the girl under that dock.

*(Signed)*

*Harold Watson*

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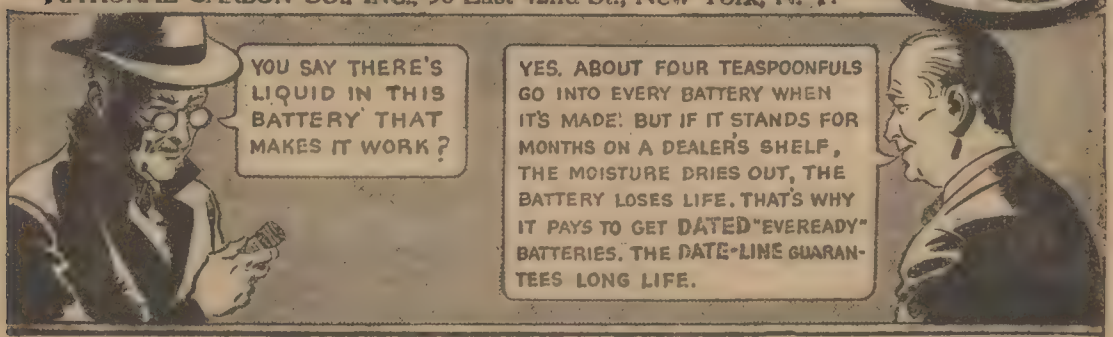

*Ketti Galvin, Black Mesa's Pretty Recorder of Deeds, Signs Over Her Rights to the Man She Hates!*

*The gun-lawyer's fists slashed out*

# OUTCAST

## By ROLLAND LYNCH

*Author of "Owlhoot Outcasts," "Lawman Without a Badge," etc.*

KETTI GALVIN sat in her gloom-shrouded land office, her fists clenched until knuckles showed white. Vainly she tried, as she did night after night, to shut the violin music from her ears. But her body was a tuning fork that caught and vibrated with the cadence.

Young Bowie Stevens played like a master when evening came down from Black Mesa and he had a few drinks under his crossed gun-belts.

Tears came to smart in Ketti's

blue eyes. Her long lashes beaded and let warm drops fall on her sun-bronzed cheeks. The haunting lilt of the tune speeded the pulse in her throat. In the early darkness, her tensely set face was a cameo haloed by burnished coppery hair.

Bowie Stevens played like this to hurt her; to make her problem more poignant. He must know it recalled his boyish grin and soothing drawl, and the times they had ridden Black Mesa together. Visions of him towering tall beside her in the moonlight, his lean brown face split in an ivory white smile, kept recurring, and she could not conquer them.

His torturous playing filled Ketti Galvin with a strange admixture of wistfulness and fury. Wistfulness, because of the love she held for him. Fury, because of what he was doing.

YOUNG STEVENS was a gun-slammer from the Rio Grande. He had returned to his father's Broken S Ranch when the water fight with Crib Pittman's Snake Iron had broken out. He had come to Ketti Galvin who was the only recorder of deeds in this part of Arizona, for information on legal rights. Courtship had begun then.

A whirlwind affair, it was, so much like the careless and reckless Bowie Stevens. He swept Ketti Galvin completely from under the hypnotic dominance of Keo Blackman, Black Mesa gun-lawyer. And it had lasted six months. But when old John Stevens was shot in the back, Bowie Stevens went to pieces.

Instead of being the gun hellion he was, he came to town with his fiddle and now cadged drinks at the Big Dry Bar. He left his younger brother, Dave Stevens, in charge of the ranch. Bowie Stevens' lame excuse was:

"There's somethin' more behind this than just killin'." Black Mesa called him plain yellow! Keo Blackman looked on and grinned.

Night after night, young Stevens tortured Ketti Galvin by playing her favorite piece:

> Two hearts beat,
> With a song complete—

This evening the quiet was broken by the heavy slog of boots. Ketti felt quick resentment in the way the step kept out of rhythm. But her rancor died as the knowledge of who it was came to her.

It was warped Frank Carse—"Cager" Carse to Black Mesa folk, the range drunkard. Cager was a perennial souse, without money, without friends, without manhood. He was of the level to which Bowie Stevens was sinking.

Cager reeled unsteadily into the dark office and mouthed: "Yuh here?"

"Yes, Frank," she answered wearily. "Sit."

"Ain't got time," mumbled Carse in a tremulous voice. "Got news that'll git me drinks. Dave Stevens' been shot!"

As if sitting on a spring suddenly released, Ketti was at his side, her hands gripping his filthy vest and shaking him.

"You know what you're saying?" she cried.

"I seen it, didn't I? Saw him go down with a hole 'atween his eyes."

Ketti Galvin didn't wait for more. From habit, her hand went into her riding-trouser pocket and came out with one of the two remaining quarters she possessed. Pressing it into Cager's palsied hand, she darted out to the street. She ran diagonally across the dusty strip, and barged through the swing doors of the Big Dry Bar.

At the sight of a woman, the patrons relaxed indolently against the long bar, their eyes licking hungrily over her supple form. The onlookers at the big poker game pressed closer to the table, as she

made her way to confront Bowie Stevens.

Abruptly his bow slid from the strings of his instrument with a squeak, and he regarded her intently. He was long and clean-limbed. His plaid shirt fit his muscled ribs and shoulders like a glove. Twin gun-belts crossed his wasp waist. Sarcastic humor came into his liquor-fired eyes as Ketti stopped before him.

"Dave's been killed!" she said with blunt harshness.

A terrible flame burned away the indolent humor in Bowie Stevens' eyes. They became hard and stark. No man in the saloon could help cringing as he witnessed the quick transition. Stevens half rose to his feet, his fine lips a grim crease.

A thrill ran through the grief Ketti felt for him. This was a tragic price to pay for being jarred back to manhood. In this moment, Bowie Stevens was the dominant character who had once swept her heart away.

But the blaze within him slowly ebbed. His coiled shoulders slumped and the fire in his eyes simmered down.

"I told him to come to town with me," he mumbled thickly.

Ketti Galvin's face drained of all color. Her blood turned to ice. She spun savagely as someone snickered. Silence grew thick under the menace of her eyes. Then she turned back, her eyes scorn-filled, her lips thinned to keep them from trembling.

"They all said you lost your courage!" she cried chokingly. "But I kept faith. Your father—now Dave—I believe what they say now. Bowie, you're as yellow as the one clean spot on your fiddle!"

SHE waited just long enough to see the awful hurt leaping into his eyes, before she turned and stumbled from the saloon.

Outside in the cool of evening, Ketti Galvin ran haltingly back to her land office and flung herself into a chair. She buried her face in her hands and wept, wept bitterly. The slender thread of hope that held her from under Keo Blackman's possessive hand had been broken.

Without the thought that some day Bowie Stevens would find himself, the cruel dominance of the Black Mesa gun-lawyer would conquer her. She was an orphan in this wild and ruthless country. She was without funds. She could not go on.

Her love for Bowie Stevens seemed to shrivel within her, leave her cold and forlorn. She was but a negative silhouette in the darkness, her shoulders heaving gently, when Blackman's broad shoulders filled the portal and he said:

"It ain't worth it, Ketti."

The man's ponderous possessiveness stabbed at her, and an angry retort rushed to her lips. She choked it back.

"I guess not," she murmured meekly, with no compassion.

The grate of Blackman's teeth was audible. "I *know* he ain't! I oughta kill that yella-backed fiddler for makin' yuh cry! Yuh still love him?" he demanded.

"I don't think so," Ketti answered forlornly. "Not after what I've just seen and heard."

"Damn him!" Keo Blackman swore angrily. "He kin make yuh change yore mind quick with his fiddlin', though. He leaves yuh wrung out like a damp rag. Now listen to me, Ketti! He's no good! An outcast! Gunman? Hell!

"When his father was killed warrin' for water rights with Crib Pittman, what'd he do? Instead of comin' to town with smokin' guns, he come with soothin' music! His own father cussed him for a yella-belly when he was dyin'. Now young Dave's gone! What's that fiddler gonna do now?"

Ketti Galvin was beaten by his words. What Keo said was true—too true. The whole of Arizona's Black Mesa knew it. She had clung tenaciously to hope. But it was gone now. She couldn't even defend Bowie Stevens, for he had left her no weapon at all.

"He'll do nothing, exactly nothing," she murmured submissively. "Maybe he'll say again that there's something deeper behind all this than just a fight over water."

Keo Blackman snorted disdainfully. His jealousy of this youngster who had held such a strong hold on her heart made him belittle Bowie Stevens at every chance.

"Alibi! That's all—just plain yella. He's afraid to face Crib Pittman. Bowie always was scared of Crib. I know—I've been the Stevens' lawyer for three years!"

A RAGGED bit of Ketti Galvin's spirit flared up. "You counseled this war between the Stevens' spread and Pittman's Snake Iron," she said evenly.

"I'm a fightin' man," boasted Keo Blackman. "I urged it in the best interests of my client, Ol' Man Stevens. When a man wants somethin'—he'll fight for it!"

His last words were obvious, and a direct insult at Bowie Stevens. Ketti shivered from their vehemence and import. Blackman had the reputation of being a fast man with those two guns that bulged black lumps beneath his broadcloth coat.

Black Mesa walked in fear of this man. He swayed his juries by arrogance and threat. Marshal Grat Griffin bowed to Keo Blackman's will. It was even rumored that Circuit Judge Valdoor was afraid of him. Ketti herself was helpless to cope with him, such was his grip upon her. His reptilian eyes held her in a strange power.

Now Keo Blackman leaned across the desk, his suave and swart face but inches from Ketti's. Despite the darkness, she could see the passion flooding his eyes. It frightened her, this stark emotion, turned her weak inside. But she couldn't pull away from that hypnotic stare.

"Name the day," he demanded matter of factly. "This land office ain't for you. Yuh're starvin' here. Yuh haven't recorded a deed in months. They'll only be one more deed to record in this country—and I want yuh married to me afore yuh do it.

"I'll make yuh queen of Black Mesa, honey! Yuh want me, don't yuh?" His crackling question brooked no denial.

"I—I want love and happiness," she mumbled helplessly. "You've never said you loved me, Keo."

"It goes without sayin'," he evaded. "You'll wear diamonds and have matched thoroughbreds to pull yore rig."

"I could be happy with a washboard and dirty-faced kids," Ketti said.

"Forget it!" snapped the lawyer. "You'll have servants and nurses."

"How? You're not a rich man, Keo," she said bluntly.

Cunning lights crept into Blackman's eyes. "I will be! My plans are workin' out. Married to me, you will share 'em. What yuh say?" he demanded.

As a woman will, she answered: "Give me time."

Keo Blackman gripped her wrist fiercely. "I'm an impatient man. If it's *him*—I'll kill him!" He straightened threateningly.

"No! No!" she cried, surging to her feet and restraining him. Then, tonelessly: "Tomorrow, Keo."

"Tomorrow," he repeated emphatically. Then his sneering lips brushed her forehead as he turned from the office.

Ketti Galvin sank back into her

chair and stared numbly at the wall of darkness outside.

For long moments, she did not move. The soft gloom blanketed her tear-stained face. Her delicate lips drooped bitterly. She felt hollow inside. Everything was gone, her dreams shattered beyond repair.

The reckless and ruthless passions of this woman-hungry land had hammered her into submission. She was penniless, had no alternative but to make the choice she had made.

Across the street was a cowboy who could turn this bottomless pit of despair to a gloriously sun-lighted prairie with a single deed of manhood! Even now, swift action on his part could bring together and heal the open wound in her heart.

But his life, too, was beyond help now. He had turned weakling and was outcast, the butt of joke and jibe. Just as some other influence dominated Bowie Stevens, Keo Blackman's dominated her. Violent action and love were the only things which would break the charm this gun-lawyer held over her. But Bowie Stevens had forsaken her in both of these.

Now a scream from the street penetrated Ketti Galvin's dulled senses. She ran outside, the cursings of Keo Blackman grating on her ears. There was a huddled body in the dust beneath the gun-lawyer's upraised foot. The sight brought a crackling command from the girl's lips.

"Keo, don't!" she exclaimed.

Reluctantly, the lawyer's booted foot quivered down. Then she was beside the pitiful figure, helping the battered Cager Carse to his feet.

"You shouldn't take advantage of him," she told Keo Blackman hotly.

"Then make him keep his drunken mouth shut!" the lawyer swore threateningly. "Another piece of blackmail outa him, and I'll let all his likker out with a slug!" He turned abruptly and swung up the street.

Ketti Galvin braced the swaying Cager and brushed at his clothes with her free hand.

"Keo's a hard man," she said soothingly.

Carse's bluish lips writhed, and he choked on his anger. Then he melted under her kindly influence. His watery eyes fixed on her with dogged devotion. Here was the only person in Black Mesa who was kind to him. Ketti never called him "Cager." It was always Frank, like a respectable man. She didn't sneer and jibe at him. She was kind.

"He hit me," he whined. "I was only—"

"I know, Frank," she interrupted gently. "Here—" she handed him her last quarter. "I won't be needing this —after tomorrow."

With the shiny silver in his hand, the drunkard turned abruptly into the saloon. Ketti stood there for minutes watching the doors saw back and forth. In Cager Carse she saw all the weaknesses of the confirmed alcoholic. He was hopelessly incurable. Death was his only liberation from this horrible thirst, clutching at him. Ketti wondered if the same general characteristics dogged him as it did Bowie Stevens.

DOWNCAST, she turned back to her office and the mean little living quarters in the rear. She was dry of emotion now. Her well of bitterness was empty. Her senses and brain were numbed by all this stress which had been dumped upon her shoulders. She flung herself upon the bed, exhausted.

Nightmarish dreams did little to freshen Ketti Galvin in the morning. She gazed dolefully into the cracked mirror over her washstand. Her eyes were sunken and lack-luster, with dark rings beneath them. As she freshened her face and brushed her

coppery curls into place, she took a firm grip upon herself.

A girl could do worse than marry Keo Blackman. He was a big man in Black Mesa. Other women would favor his attentions, but all of his had been for her. That was flattering in itself. She couldn't be expected to waste her life on an outcast. No, she wouldn't do it!

Bowie Stevens had proved what he thought of her love by never coming near her, despite his being just across the street. She must thrust all this behind her like a bad dream and go on, she reasoned.

Perhaps she could learn to love Keo Blackman. She experienced a moment's doubt over that, but deliberately conquered her jumbled thoughts.

It was nearly ten o'clock, with the sun sending its hammer strokes of heat upon Black Mesa, when Keo Blackman swung into the office. He was immaculately groomed, with white stiff collar and flowing black stock. His black, stove-pipe hat sat rakishly atop his head.

Cager Carse trailed in behind him, his blue-veined hands jingling silver in his pockets. He had made a pitiful attempt to wash up, but no soap or water on earth could clean away those blue veins branding his cheeks and nose.

Ketti Galvin wondered at this alliance now, after what happened last night. But Cager was drunk and had money. There was no cataloguing his moods.

KETTI pulled her bonnet into place. This was the day Judge Valdoor sat at the town hall.

"I'm ready," she announced simply.

Keo Blackman's eyes flashed as he looked at her, standing there. It made her tense and rigid. The lawyer said gruffly:

"Come on!" Then he took her arm and helped her to the boardwalk. As they left the office, Blackman swung her down-street.

"What's the matter with Judge Valdoor?" Ketti Galvin asked in a strained way.

Keo Blackman kept his face straight ahead. "Ain't in town yet," he answered tersely. "When he sits, I want us married, so's I kin let him probate the Stevens' will."

"Will?" echoed Ketti Galvin in surprise. "Why should there be a will? Ownership is plain."

"I drew it up," said Blackman. "It'll be settled today."

It was just as well, Ketti reflected, that there was a will. With the Stevens' ranch suddenly dropped into Bowie Stevens' lap, the youngster might assume responsibility and turn his life into something useful. With this thought helping her past the whirlings of her brain, Ketti Galvin turned into Chip Smith's mean little shack.

Chip was old and bald and greasy. Ketti had never known he was a parson. He worked at the corral now, when he wasn't drunk, doing odd jobs and cleaning stables. Chip hitched up his frayed suspenders and bent owlish eyes on her.

At a motion from Keo Blackman, Chip pulled a little black book from his back pocket and confronted them. Roughly, Blackman jerked Cager Carse into position. Carse would be the witness.

Ketti Galvin became ice inside. All the beauty and gentleness that should attend such a ceremony as this was utterly lacking. This was more like having a terrible sentence pronounced than pledging love, honor and obedience. If the reality of it all wasn't so starkly tangible, Ketti could have laughed.

This squalid, filthy room. A stable tender smelling of horses and sweat. A witness teetering drunkenly back and forth on his toes. A wild desire to break from all this possessed the girl.

Chip Smith fumbled with his words as he thumbed through his book. "Yuh take this here fella, Keo Blackman, to be yore ol' man?" he asked thickly.

"Husband!" corrected Keo Blackman harshly.

The pressure of the lawyer's fingers bit into her arm. Mechanically, Ketti Galvin answered:

"Yes." That word ended her life of bitterness and poverty, but she felt a quick desire to retract. It was too late. Keo Blackman was saying:

"I do!" and Chip Smith was shoving his book back into his pocket.

The parson spread his grimy hands. "Yuh're man and wife," he mumbled hoarsely.

Keo Blackman did not bend down to kiss his bride. Instead, he pulled her from the shack. The predatory and cunning lights in his eyes were not nice things to see and Ketti was shocked by the sudden transition.

She had the sudden premonition that the nuptials were but a stride the gun-lawyer had taken to further some diabolical plan.

NOW Keo Blackman cracked out to Carse: "Go tell him. Then come to the office!"

Unsteadily, Cager slogged through the dust of the street for Bowie Stevens' room up over the Big Dry Bar.

Ketti swung furiously on the man she had just pledged herself to. "Why rub it in?" she asked angrily, twin spots of flame leaping to her cheeks.

Devilish lights played in Blackman's eyes. "That ain't all," he said nastily. "He'll be leavin' the country today. He'll be a whipped cur—with me givin' out the lashes!"

"Meaning what?" Ketti's flesh crawled at the cruelty of this man. She had never seen it so dominant before.

"You'll see," Blackman growled, and led her back to her office.

Inside at the desk, the lawyer pulled a legal packet from his pocket and spread it out on the desk. He reached for the quill and ink, and began to work.

Ketti watched narrowly over his shoulder.

Her eyes grew round with incredulity. It was impossible to believe what she saw! Keo Blackman had left blank spaces in the Stevens' will; by filling them in he could turn the Broken S into his own possession. It was so cleverly worded and adroitly done that an expert would never find fault with it.

Out of the tail of her eye, Ketti saw Bowie Stevens slide past on his way toward the town hall. His guns rose and fell on his legs with his even stride. But his step lacked spring, and there was a whipped droop to his sturdy shoulders.

Sensing the girl might call out to Stevens, Keo Blackman whipped out a gun and laid it on the desk. The gesture was a warning Ketti heeded. Her teeth shut with a click. A shout would cause the youngster's death.

Two things happened with startling rapidity within her. One second, she felt lifeless; the next resolute. Her fists were clenched when the gun lawyer finished his writing and swung to her.

"You kin record the Broken S in my name," he leered, "while I'm at the hall. When I come back, you and me'll own the spread."

"I'd die before I would!" Ketti shot back, lips grim. "I'm beginning to see a difference in some of the colors around here. Bowie Stevens might be yellow, but it's a pretty color compared to the black in your heart!"

Ruthlessly, Keo Blackman gripped her wrist and twisted. He grinned as pain came into her face and drained it of blood.

"You'll do it, all right," he gritted.

"I'll kill this fancy spirit of yore'n —and yore love for *him!*"

"Not with pain," she taunted him. "The minute you let me go—I'll tell Judge Valdoor what a rotten forger you are!"

A peal of laughter shook Keo Blackman then. "That's rich! Listen, hell-kitty—yuh're my wife now. Valdoor won't listen to yore testimony. Besides, yuh'd make yoreself look pretty sweet, tellin' everybody how yuh married me, and then dishin' up the dirt."

The sudden knowledge that this was true made Ketti wilt. Her strength deserted her, and she leaned weakly against the rough wall. She understood this renegade now.

He had married her for one thing. That was to record this forged will and give him the Broken S!

This was but part of Keo Blackman's diabolical plan. His avaricious traits were bared before Ketti now. She meant nothing to the lawyer, nothing but a means of triumph over another man. There was only one thing close to this man—power!

It was his altar stone. Blackman worshiped at it, juggled lives cunningly that he might have it. Self-recriminations were bitter now within her. She should have forseen this. She was but a pawn in this killer's game!

CHUCKLING evilly, Keo Blackman pulled her close, disregarding her protestations. Ketti resented his touch as she would the striking fangs of a snake.

"Yuh married a smart hombre," Blackman leered, his face close to hers. "I've been three years workin' this out! I'll tell yuh somethin' clever—because I know yuh still love Bowie Stevens. Crib Pittman ain't the owner of the Snake Iron. *I am!*

"He's jest my ramrod. He started this war to kill all the Stevens off. We got the ol' man first, figgerin' to excite the boys to gunsmoke. Bowie threw a kink in our plans when he came to town with his fiddle. Dave Stevens took the bait, and got hisself buried!

"But this way is jest as easy," Blackman gloated. "I've whipped Bowie Stevens by winnin' you. What spirit he had left is gone. He won't contest the will. He'll leave the country!"

Ketti pressed hard against the lawyer's chest, but couldn't liberate herself. "Then he has been right when he made the statement there was something deeper behind all this than just a fight for water rights," she cried.

"The guess of a fool," Keo Blackman sneered. "He'll never find out. Yuh don't dare tell him! If yuh come into court, I'll put yore story down to former love for Bowie Stevens, and they'll laugh yuh outa town. Come on, honey, give yore husband a kiss afore yuh start recordin'!" he said gloatingly.

With that awful light in his eyes, Blackman bent her head down. Ketti squirmed like a manacled cougar, but she was no match for his strength. With blind fury, she struck at his face. Her tiny fists caromed off his nose and drew blood.

Bellowing with anger, the gun-lawyer released her. Then his own fists lashed out. Without a whimper, she took the full force of the blows. Shock ran the length of Ketti's body, and she slumped against the wall.

Her legs seemed made of rubber, folded under her. She brought up sharply on the floor, her hand impulsively stroking the livid bruise beginning to dye her cheek.

Keo Blackman stood over her, breathing heavily. "I'll tame yuh," he snarled, "or kill yuh—one! I'll break yore heart and spirit like I'm doin' *his!* And yuh'll make me money, too!

"Now tell that drunken Carse when he comes back to get to the

hall. He's a witness." Then the lawyer was spinning from the office, dabbing his nose with his handkerchief—

How long she sat thus gazing unseeingly into space, Ketti did not know. Her body hurt from Blackman's blows, but this was as nothing against the emotions knifing her. Without protection and counsel, she had made a mess of her life. Keo Blackman's suave unctuousness had fooled her completely. Bowie Stevens had let her down. She was lost utterly.

Ketti didn't even look up as Cager Carse reeled into the room. He stood swayingly above her for a long moment, then he asked thickly:

"What's the matter?" The tenderness in his cracked voice was surprising.

Through tear-dimmed eyes, Ketti looked at him. "Keo struck me," she murmured wearily. "He should have killed me!"

Cager lost his balance when he knelt down, but regained it quickly. "Hit yuh, huh?" he grated. "Damn his black soul! He's too ready with his fists!"

A TERRIBLE bitterness came into Cager Carse's voice then, and he reeled to a straight position, mumbling incoherent words. Then his speech became understandable.

"—He's done enough. I kin stand a lot, but he can't hit the only friend I got! To hell with his hundred dollars! To hell with all his promises! To hell with him!" Then Cager Carse was wheeling from the office and pounding down the boardwalk.

Gathering her scattered senses, Ketti leaped to her feet. She knew Cager's purpose. Fired by liquor, the oldster would confront Keo Blackman with accusations and probably get beaten up or killed. She couldn't let *that* happen! Ketti was sick of misery and pain and the hurt she had caused to others.

Snatching up her gun from the desk drawer, the girl ran after the stumbling oldster. Her breath labored from her lungs as she reached the town hall portal. Carse had been too swift for her and was already inside.

Steeling herself against the furor she would cause, against the shame and disgrace she would bring upon herself, Ketti entered the court room. Her gun dangled limply in her hand. Slowly, she walked toward the bench, from which Judge Valdoor peered owlishly over his spectacle rims at this double interruption.

Keo Blackman was sitting in the witness chair, his fingers pyramided in his lap. His eyes went pale and hard at the sight of Ketti behind Cager Carse. Bowie Stevens stared indolently from a chair beside the bailiff. His eyes took on a scornful, savage gleam at the sight of the girl. Neither Blackman nor Stevens could see the gun pressing against the folds of her dress.

Now the judge rapped for order as Cager Carse stood weavingly before him. "Sit down, Carse!" he commanded crisply.

"Court's in session. I'm about to render a decision, according to the dictates of the late John Stevens' will. I'll ask yuh your necessary questions in a lump. Yuh kin answer all of them with one 'yes' or 'no.'

"Were yuh a witness at the deathbed of John Stevens? Did yuh see him take his pen and affix his name to his will? Was he in his right mind at the time, and during the signing of his own last testament? Answer 'yes' or 'no,'" the judge ordered. He seemed anxious to get the whole business over with.

Ketti was conscious of the silky grin on Keo Blackman's features. Bowie Stevens was staring hard at her. She knew why, and her hand came up to cover the ugly bruise on

her cheek. Then—startlingly, Cager Carse's *"No!"* electrified the courtroom.

Both Keo Blackman and Bowie Stevens surged to their feet. Now Ketti caught the movement of Crib Pittman, surly and ferret-eyed, standing among the spectators at her right. She could have reached out and touched him.

Judge Valdoor rapped with his gavel. "Silence!" he thundered. "Now, Carse, perhaps yuh didn't understand me—"

"I did, aw right!" rumbled the oldster stridently. Then he was spinning on Keo Blackman, his grimy finger shaking at the gun-lawyer.

"Yuh cain't hit my only friend, Keo, especial' when it's a woman! To hell with yore hundred dollars and yore promises! Ketti Galvin's the only person in Black Mesa that ever took me for a man. Calls me Frank, she does!

"Yuh cain't get her to record no deed by whippin' her. She *knows* it's forged, as well as me! As for bein' with Ol' John— Hell! I even seed yuh shoot him in the back! I seen Pittman down Dave Stevens. I kin see more'n yuh think with these ol' eyes—" he went on, courageously.

"He's ravin' drunk!" Blackman cursed, his suave face pale.

"YEAH?" Carse ranted. "That ain't even my name on that will as witness! I never could read nor write, Keo—not even my own name. Mebbeso I'm drunk, but *yuh ain't gonna hurt this gal!"* he shouted, a man once again.

"He's been bribed to say this!" Blackman screamed savagely.

"Miss Ketti don't need to bribe *me!"* Carse retorted. *"I* know yore tricks, Keo Blackman! Yuh own the Snake Iron. Crib Pittman's only a gun-slingin' dummy of yore'n. *You* started this war—"

"And finishin' it right now!" Keo Blackman swore luridly, diving for his guns.

A gasp of horror escaped Ketti's lips and she tried to reach Cager Carse. But she was too late. One shot from Blackman's gun sprawled him onto the floor, a pitiful broken huddle. Ketti's next thought was of Bowie Stevens. She spun around. Admiration rushed to the girl's eyes as she saw the calm way he waited for Keo Blackman to swing his gun.

Then the two of them were staring their hatred at each other as they rocked their hammers. Gunsmoke curled about Bowie Stevens' stalwart frame; Ketti saw him whirl around, drop his left gun. He was hit! Strength drained from the girl's body as an awful fear overpowered her.

But Keo Blackman was down now, smashed back against the witness chair. Dying where he had perjured himself!

Through the terrible excitement, Ketti heard Crib Pittman curse softly. His gun was out, trained on Bowie Stevens' back! Speed rushed into Ketti's hand that still held her gun.

With the expertness gleaned from long hours of former practice with Bowie Stevens, Ketti tunneled Crib Pittman's arm. His gun clattered to the floor as the ramrod screamed with pain. The bailiff made a dive, got hold of the man.

Sobbing that she was all right and desperately asking about his wound, Ketti ran into Bowie Stevens' arms. The strength of him, holding her tight, sent a wild flood racing through the girl's veins. Here was a protection against further harm! No longer were the youngster's powerful muscles slumbering. Every fighting instinct within him was aroused—and he had proved himself at last!

With Crib Pittman cursing them as he was led away, Ketti and Bowie Stevens gained the side of the

wounded Cager Carse. Some spectators had turned him upon his back. The young couple bent down close, as Cager's old eyes beckoned them. And through a blood-bubble that came to his lips, he said huskily:

"Keo's beatin' me to hell, thanks to you, Bowie! That's good. I jest couldn't see him hurt Ketti. I was sore about the mock weddin', too—"

"Mock wedding?" Bowie Stevens asked quickly.

"Yeah," mumbled the dying man thickly. "Chip Smith ain't no Bible wrangler. Take a look at the book in his back pocket he used. It's the *almanac;* I know, because I cain't read, and he usta let me look at the pictures.

"Keo jest wanted the deed recorded, and then sell the ranch in Mexico. I couldn't stand for *that!* You was kind to me, Miss Ketti. Called me Frank, and gave me money to chase the snakes. Yep! Called me Frank—like Lizzy usta do—" And so he died.

Gentle sobs shook Ketti Galvin. Here was another man who had proved himself. What his problem was, was gone with him. It was just as well. Black Mesa would remember him for a man.

It didn't take Judge Valdoor long to probate the Stevens' will. And it didn't take long for the legal marriage. The judge declared court closed immediately after the ceremony, so he could ride at the head of the biggest funeral Black Mesa ever staged. And he helped Bowie Stevens fashion Frank Carse's boothill headboard:

He asked much,
But returned more.

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IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

●

# LONE WOLVES OF THE SAGE

*A Novelette of a Badman's Love*

## By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

●

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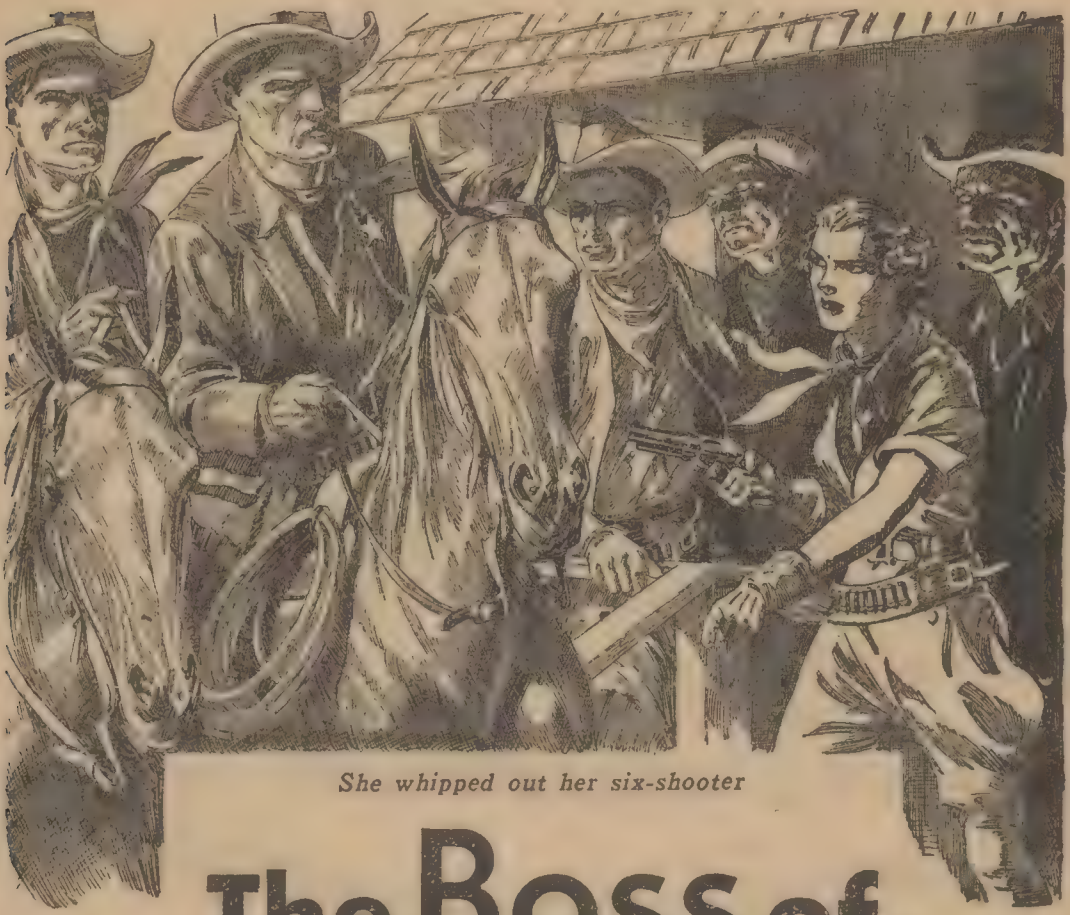

*She whipped out her six-shooter*

# The Boss of Ridge Valley

## By TOM CURRY

*Author of "Gun Canyon," "Lynch Mob," etc.*

FLORRIE YOUNG was furious as she tapped the toe of her dainty riding boot on the ranchhouse floor, facing "Bal" Addison, owner of the Quarter Circle A.

Addison, "Big Boss of Razor-Ridge Valley," as he was known, was powerful not only in his herds of cattle and spread of his land, but in body as well. He was a hulking giant, heavy through the bearlike chest; with arms and legs like tree limbs. He stared at Florrie with insolent admiration in his pale blue eyes as she told him what she thought of him.

"Gosh," he murmured, reaching out to grasp her small hand, "but yuh're purtier 'n ever when yuh got yore dander up, Florrie!"

It was true; the pink flush of her rounded cheeks only accentuated her dark-haired beauty. And, without any more trouble than if he were handling a small child, he drew her to him and planted a kiss on her lips, though she scratched and kicked at him.

"Let go—let go of me!" she cried angrily, impotent against his great strength.

He grinned as he kissed her again; then he released her. She slapped his face with the flat of her hand, striking as hard as she could but, though his eyes darkened a moment, it did not hurt his leathery cheek in the least.

"Why not jine brands with me, Florrie?" Addison asked, starting to roll himself a cigarette.

"I—I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!" she declared hotly, tears of rage in her eyes.

OUTSIDE, the Arizona sun shone bright, yellow as gold; the air was warm, scented with the flayed alfalfa, used for winter feed. A line of giant cottonwoods ran for a half mile from the door of the wide, rambling, one-storied ranchhouse, the biggest spread in five counties; and, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the rolling, grass pasture land that supported thousands of head of Quarter Circle A steers. A river that never failed gave a permanent, valuable water supply to the vast valley hemmed in by razor-sharp ridges.

Three generations before, a common ancestor of Florrie Young and Bal Addison had homesteaded this rich valley. They were distant cousins, but Addison had never paid much attention to Florrie until the past few months. After her father's death she had been left alone on her small outfit, the Bar Y, up at the north end of the valley. That, in the legal shuffle of the years, had come to her as an inheritance through her mother's family.

Suddenly Addison had begun to pay her violent court, begged her to marry him. But somehow she didn't care about the big fellow. He was ten years older than she, and he had an unsavory reputation among women.

"Wisht yuh wouldn't be so sore," he growled, stooping to light his cigarette.

"Why shouldn't I be? You're making it impossible for me to earn a decent living. Who's going to buy my beef when they can get yours at half the price?"

She stared, still furious, into his narrowed eyes. "The price you set is ruinous," she repeated. "Ruinous to me—and to any rancher, yourself included."

He shrugged. "It shows," he drawled, "jest how much I care 'bout yuh, Florrie dear."

"Yes, I understand," she said, voice trembling with sarcasm. "You love me so much you're going to force me into bankruptcy!"

"Aw, no. Jest want yuh to marry me. When we're hitched, we'll sell at any price yuh say. I got forty thousand head, yuh got five, and yore spread's on'y a tenth the size of mine. Yuh kin see I want to marry yuh for love. What else would I gain?"

She shook her head firmly. Bal Addison didn't have the name of being willing to lose money for anything, certainly not for a woman.

Suddenly a booted tread sounded on the porch behind her, and a long shadow fell across the boards.

"Well, Jimmy, what yuh want?" demanded Addison impatiently. "Can't yuh see I'm busy?"

She turned, saw a brown-faced young man, lean of waist, broad at the shoulders. His right arm was in a tight sling bandage and there was the scab of an abrasion on his clear-skinned forehead. He wore black

pants, a clean blue shirt. He was, she realized, Jim Surrel, one of Addison's cowpunchers, a fellow who broke broncs for the outfit in season. She remembered having heard he had been thrown by an outlaw pony, broken an arm, been cut up some.

He had evidently been lying up in bed for some time, had sustained other injuries more shaking than the arm. And now he was recuperating.

"Look here," snapped Surrel, and Florrie saw the dark flush of blood under his tanned skin, "look here, Addison, I want my time!"

"Aw right, aw right," replied Addison angrily. "Git out, the foreman'll take keer of yuh when he rides in. Yuh ain't been no good lately anyways and it'll be another month 'fore yuh're wuth yore salt. Glad to be rid of yuh."

"I ain't waitin' for no foreman, nor nuthin'. I want my time—now."

"How much?" snarled Addison, eyes smoldering with fury.

"Sixty dollars."

Addison reached in his pocket, tore off several bills from a large roll, threw it in a wad in Surrel's face.

"Git out!" he roared.

Officially off the Quarter Circle A's payroll, not deigning to pick up the money, Jim Surrel said coolly to Florrie Young:

"I was lyin' out in the shade, ma'am, nappin'. I was woke up by yore voices, and couldn't help overhearin' some of what was said. I wouldn't say anything against a man whose salt I'm eatin', but now I've quit, and I'll tell yuh how it happens Addison kin afford to undersell yuh so. He ain't losin' money, not by a jugful. Addison—"

The sound of the shot roared in the big living room of the house, echoes booming in the hall. Jim Surrel's voice was broken off short, and Florrie saw the spasmodic agony in his boyish face as he whirled, crashed at her feet, lay still.

A daughter of the rough Western land, she did not scream nor lose her head. She looked quickly around, saw Addison's black face, his gritted yellow buck teeth exposed by his snarl of hatred. In his huge paw was gripped the six-gun with which he had shot down Jim Surrel.

She wondered what it was that Surrel had tried to tell her; evidently, hearing Addison's attempt to force her to marry him, Surrel's sense of chivalry had been aroused and he'd come in to help her. She felt a pang in her breast at the sight of the young man, unconscious there on the floor; maybe dead.

ADDISON, the gun in his hand, hammer spur back under the joint of his calloused thumb, cigarette trailing smoke from the corner of his sneer-twisted lips, stepped toward Surrel. Florrie watched the giant, not guessing his object for a moment.

"You murderer!" she cried.

"Dry up!" ordered Addison gruffly. "He tried to draw on me, didn't he? 'Twas self-defense."

"He hasn't even got a gun-belt on," she flamed.

Addison's rage still flared high; he raised the six-gun, taking aim at Jim Surrel's heart.

"Throw up your hands, Bal," ordered Florrie, whipping out her own pistol. At a distance of two yards she held a steady bead on Addison.

He paused. "Aw, yuh wouldn't shoot me," he said tentatively. "Ain't I yore own cousin?"

"You're a killer," she told him coldly.

"He ain't dead—not yit," growled Addison. "I hadda shoot careful so's not to hit you, Florrie, and I on'y clipped his head."

Florrie quickly turned the situation over in her clever mind. For the sake of humanity, she couldn't leave Jim Surrel to Addison's mercies; besides, she was curious to know what

information Surrel meant to give her, that Bal Addison considered important enough to pull a gun to prevent him telling.

Addison was watching her, eyes narrowed. She could see the tenseness of his big muscles, realized he must just be hoping for a chance to disarm her. She remained on the alert, eyes puckered at the corners, the pistol steady in her slim hand.

"Yuh got plenty spunk, Florrie," Addison remarked admiringly. "Yessir, I like yuh for it. Yuh'll make me a good wife."

"You fool!" she snapped. "You're in trouble. I saw you shoot Surrel, and I'm going to tell the law all about it. I certainly don't owe *you* any consideration!"

He laughed. "Yuh won't testify against yore husband," he remarked.

Gun still steady, Florrie ordered coldly: "All right, we won't argue any longer, Bal. Surrel needs attention. He's bleeding. Pick him up—pronto, now."

"Huh?" he demanded, not understanding what she meant to do.

"Pick him up, I said." The black gun muzzle threateningly covered Addison.

"What yuh goin' to do?"

"Take him to my ranch and look out for him till he can talk."

"THE devil yuh say! Leave him here, Florrie. I'll put him in the bunkhouse, and we'll nurse him."

She laughed. "So you can finish him off as you want to? Nothing doing. Pick him up—hustle, lay him across my saddle."

He hesitated, then, seeing how determined she was, he strolled over, shouldered Jim Surrel and carried him out into the sunshine, Florrie at his back, six-gun leveled on his spine.

There was a scowl on the big man's face as she shortly ordered him to go back into the house. She started off, leading her pony, keeping an eye back on the door. Addison appeared as she walked under the line of trees. Seeing her still alert, he went around to a corral, saddled a bronc and followed her at a safe distance.

She mounted when she came to the trail that led to her ranch northward, and at a slow pace headed for the Bar Y.

Bal Addison came sweeping out on his big cayuse, headed toward her. She sent a shot back, the bullet whining over his Stetson, and he pulled up, paused, then swung his horse and cantered toward Pinetown, the small cowtown at the south end of the valley.

Jim Surrel began to talk, deliriously, after a few miles of the jogging ride. Florrie did her best to calm him, gave him sips of water from her canteen. Blood seeped slowly from his head wound and she paused to put an emergency bandage on it.

Finally she came to her spread, the small, compact ranchhouse, with corrals and barn, a bunkhouse for the few hands she could afford. She had had to let all but a skeleton crew go lately, unable to sell any beef because of Addison's cut-throat competition. She was in debt—had to make regular payments to keep her property.

The sun was a huge red ball in the sky as her old wrangler, Jake, who was also riding range now, assisted her in carrying Jim Surrel into a side room of the house, placing him on a cot. She at once set about cleansing and dressing the bullet wound. He was, she realized, a good-looking young fellow, eyes fine, jaw strong. She felt a new warmth in her heart as he lay there so helpless.

Surrel was pretty weak. She was trying to get him back to sane consciousness, for he kept mumbling wildly, the head wound having shaken his brain, when Jake let out

a whoop and Florrie hustled to the front porch.

Riding swiftly in on the ranch she saw a half dozen men, led by Sheriff Drew of Pinetown, at the south of the valley.

In Drew's posse rode big Bal Addison, and several of his punchers. The last rays of the sun glinted on the five-pointed star pinned to Drew's vest.

The Bar Y men were now in from the range work they had been doing through the day. They lined up, four of them, coolly surveying the sheriff.

FLORRIE didn't like Sheriff Drew. She knew that he did exactly as Addison, who had put him in office, commanded.

"What do you want?" she demanded, as they rode grimly up.

"Addison says yuh got a lean young hombre here, goin' by the name of Jim Surrel," replied Drew, politely enough, touching his Stetson. "Now, ma'am, yuh got a good heart, yuh're takin' care of him from mercy, but mebbe yuh'll feel diff'rent when yuh hear that this Surrel's a murderer. He shot a man in the back, over in Texas, and is wanted there. I got a warrant for him."

"You can't have him," Florrie said firmly. "And I don't believe you. It's too pat. If you knew he was wanted, why is it you waited till he left the Quarter Circle A? Addison's put up this job."

A brick-red flush crept up under the skin of the sheriff's leathery cheek. He spat a stream of brown tobacco juice, and snapped:

"Here—look at the warrant!"

He walked his pony up, passed her a paper at which she hurriedly glanced. It was a warrant, filled in with Surrel's description.

"I don't care," she said stubbornly. "You're not going to take him. You could easy fill out one of your own blanks. The ink's pretty fresh."

Drew made a threatening movement. The tension was such that at any instant it might snap, shooting might begin, many men die. Florrie's punchers were loyal and their guns were ready in oiled, supple holsters.

Addison seemed impatient to start the fight. "Come on," he snarled, "let's git in and take him, Drew!"

Florrie's determination would not crack. Again she whipped out her six-shooter, covering the sheriff and Addison, close beside him.

"Turn and ride," she ordered, "before we wipe you out. I know you, Drew! You've cooked this up by Addison's orders. Get!"

For an instant Drew and Addison sat their horses, refusing to move. Then Addison shrugged. "C'mon, Drew," he growled. "We'll take him later. No sense hurtin' anybody here."

"Yuh're buckin' the law, young woman," Drew snarled. "Yuh'll regret it." But he swung his mount, and the posse trotted off.

Old Jake let out a derisive laugh. It infuriated Bal Addison, and the big rancher swung, sent a shot that smacked into the 'dobe brick, spattering Jake with fragments of dried mud. At once firing opened up, bullets exchanged between the two parties. But it was at a distance and, at Florrie's orders, her men retired to the safety of the other side of the wall. The shooting ceased with no one hurt save for a singe along one man's leg.

As darkness fell, Florrie kept a puncher on guard, to prevent any surprise in the night. She cooked some broth and took it in to feed to Jim Surrel. He was much better, though his face was drawn. He was still in pain from the wound. The warm liquid, which she gave to him by spoon, an arm around his pillowed head to brace him, revived him, and he was almost himself again.

He kept looking up into her eyes, and his expression told her how much he appreciated her care. She could not prevent the warm flush that came to her soft cheeks.

"Gosh, ma'am," he murmured at last, "but yuh're so beautiful! Yuh're —yuh're an angel, to bother 'bout me thisaway."

"Finish this soup—it'll make you stronger," she ordered.

SHE was a little confused at the feeling in her heart; she was so happy that she had brought Surrel here that she forgot she had saved him not only for his own sake but for her own, till he himself spoke of it.

"What I was tryin' to tell yuh, ma'am, when Addison shot me," Surrel said gravely, holding tightly to her fingers with his uninjured hand, "is that the reason Bal kin undersell so, is he's been buyin' stolen stock. He ain't a rustler hisself, but he takes from sev'ral bunches who run stuff from over Texas way. He gits 'em cheap, and he ain't losin' any money even at such low prices as he sells. I on'y found that out a day or two back, overheard some talk that went on, savvy, while I was laid up around the house. Meant to quit soon as I could ride."

"I—I'm sorry I've got you in this mess, Jim," she told him. She tried to withdraw her hand but he was so pitiful, face so drawn and white, she let him retain it. She found, too, that her heart thrilled at his touch.

She kept talking, to hide her confusion. "Bal set the sheriff after you, dug up that old charge. That's my fault. But soon as you're able, I'll see you get away safe and sound."

"Huh?" he asked. "What charge yuh mean, Florrie?"

"Why—that killing you did in Texas—"

"They—they said I was wanted for murder?" he demanded incredulously.

Joy flooded her heart. "Then you mean you're not on the dodge, Jim?"

He smiled. "'Course not. Addison must've trumped that up, tryin' to git me outa here. Guess he's jealous and hoped to keep me from tellin' yuh 'bout them stolen cows he's marketin'."

She was relieved. She couldn't, she felt, cotton to a man who had done a cold-blooded murder; but now she realized Surrel just couldn't have committed such a crime. He was too clean, too decent.

A sudden whoop, a shot, then more explosions outside in the night, sent Florrie dashing out with her pistol. Her punchers, sleeping on a hair-trigger, were rushing to Jake's assistance. Crafty old Jake had been lying out in the chaparral, on guard, and had seen Drew and his men creeping in, on foot, through the brush.

Wild shots, the flare and blare of rifles and six-shooters, the stentorian shouts of fighting men. The battle waged hot for swift moments but, realizing they were exposed, that they could not take the house by surprise, the posse withdrew as quickly as they had come up. A Bar Y man had a bullet through the leg, but Old Jake had seen the enemy toting off a man, so they were even.

The guard was maintained throughout the night. When dawn came, Florrie rose, hurriedly dressed, went in to see that Jim Surrel was all right. He was awake, eyes turned yearningly toward the door. When he saw her, they lighted up with intense joy and he smiled at her.

"How are you?" she asked, she, too, felt emotion at seeing him. They were drawn together by invisible but irresistible bonds.

"Fine," he murmured, and reached for her hand. "I shore feel better, seein' yuh." She let him take her

hand, coloring slightly at his touch. She could feel the power of his youthful body. He was rapidly regaining his strength.

The wound, she found, had done well. It was clean, and the bleeding had ceased. She put on a fresh dressing, then went to get his breakfast. The day seemed wonderful. She had never felt such intense happiness, despite her troubles.

Later, when the sun rose over the ridges, she saddled up and rode out, Jake at her pony's heels, for a look, to make sure the posse had retired. Coming up over a rise in the grassy prairie, she saw them below in the flats, near a spring. They were on her land, and she was indignant.

"Say, who's that dude feller ridin' from direction of town?" old Jake growled.

The posse did not see Florrie and Jake. They were looking toward the south, too, at the man in black who was riding toward the Bar Y.

FROM her vantage point, Florrie and old Jake observed the play. Sheriff Drew put up his hand, and the rider slowed, came to him. The words that were spoken were inaudible at that distance to Florrie, but suddenly she saw Drew put out his hand and yank the rider from his saddle. The man made no physical resistance. He allowed the men to search him, and Drew handed a sheaf of papers he took from the prisoner's pocket to Bal Addison.

Addison, having looked over the papers, pocketed them, and swung suddenly. He saw Florrie there on the rise, with old Jake, uttered a loud shout, and ran for his pony.

"Wonder what's that all about?" Florrie said.

"That dude shore don't seem welcome to Addison," growled Jake, as they swung their ponies.

They were only a couple of miles from home and had no fear of not getting back. The posse saddled up swiftly, started after them. But both Florrie and old Jake rode first-class mounts that easily kept the distance even between them and their pursuers.

Suddenly, as old Jake looked back over his shoulder to make sure Addison and his henchmen weren't drawing up on them, his pony hit a soft spot, thin earth over a gopher burrow. The slim hoof turned under, there was a sharp snapping sound and Jake, with a curse, went head over heels, coming up with rein still in hand. He wasn't hurt; but his pony couldn't rise. Its leg bone was cracked.

"Go on—ride and bring the boys, Florrie," bawled Jake.

But she wouldn't leave him. She swung back, drew her six-gun, dismounting and taking to the pile of rocks toward which old Jake ran.

A hoarse howl of triumph issued from Bal Addison's throat as he saw them take cover. Bullets spat close to old Jake, and wild ones near to Florrie, though Addison evidently didn't want her killed. Apparently he wished to take her prisoner.

Lying flat on the stony earth, Florrie and Jake sent forth a hot fire that stopped the sheriff and his friends in their tracks. The posse retired to a safer distance, dismounted, took cover and began to creep in, running from rock to rock, bush to bush.

The sun blazed down, cooking Florrie and Jake as they lay behind their rocks. A trickle of blood showed on Jake's leathery cheek from a cut made by a lead fragment that had spattered against him.

"Say—lookit that!" growled Jake.

The dude stranger, taking advantage of the posse's preoccupation, suddenly leaped up and started to run, zigzagging, away from his captors. Bal Addison swung, sent a shot that brought the dude down, head over heels, in a limp heap. He lay as he had fallen. They could see

the dark rage that twisted the giant's face.

"Gimme some more forty-five bullets, Florrie," old Jake said presently. "I think they're goin' to rush us."

"Haven't you got your belt full?" she asked.

"Why, no, ma'am. It was hung on my hoss—guess I got some rattled when he went down."

"Mine are about gone, too."

"In and git 'em!" they heard Addison roar. His temper had snapped. "Kill that old coyote and grab Florrie. Crease her if yuh hafta."

Lead began singing over their ducked heads. They had to press close to the sharp stones to keep from being hit. It was only a question of moments until Addison had them.

FROM the direction of the ranch a lone rider appeared, spurring swiftly toward them. He rode low over his pony, though he had the use of only one arm; the other was in a sling.

"It's Surrel—there he comes, shoot him down!" roared Bal Addison.

Bullets began to fly through the still, hot air. Spurts of dust rose as they struck the dirt, whirling close around Surrel, who drove in at full speed.

"This way, Jim—be careful," screamed Florrie.

He heard her voice over the din, swerved toward her, face pale, but set with determination. He flung himself off his horse as the animal leaped madly, struck by slugs from the enemy. Then he was down beside Florrie, breath coming fast, pistol in his unhurt hand, plenty of ammunition for them all.

"I—I seen yuh ride out—figgered yuh might run into trouble," he gasped. "Had to come—"

She pressed his wrist firmly. But there was no time for talk. As though the sight of his rival totally infuriated him, made him throw caution to the winds, Bal Addison ordered the charge, and the hard-shooting hombres with Sheriff Drew scuttled in. The volleys from their six-guns spattered like hail against the low rocks. Bellows, cries of anguish rose as men were hit, and fought on.

"Aim at Addison!" cried Surrel.

Three six-guns rose. Jake whipped back with a grunt as a slug took off half his ear and laid open his scalp. A bullet burned Florrie's shoulder. Addison was almost upon them, nostrils flaring, eyes red with killer fury. His gun was up, about to shoot pointblank into Surrel. Florrie and Surrel fired an instant ahead of Addison. Bal Addison still came on, though he did not shoot. He crashed face down, within a yard of their shelter; lay quiet.

Two more of the posse were struck and, disheartened by Addison's fall, retreat suddenly began. They turned and ran for it. The besieged held their fire, allowing them to reach their horses, ride off toward Pinetown.

Yells sounded in the distance as Florrie's remaining men came up, attracted by the heavy shooting. Surrel was bent over Bal Addison.

"He ain't dead but it'll be a long while 'fore he pulls any more dirty tricks," he growled.

The paper taken from the dude, who still lay there on the dirt, attracted Florrie's eye. She drew it out of the unconscious Addison's pocket; opened it. They were legal documents, with a lawyer's heading, and a letter addressed to Florrie herself.

She read the communication:

Dear Miss Young:

Discovery of an old will has made it incontestably evident that the land of the Ridge Valley, now held title to by Balford Addison, your cousin, belongs to you. Our representative will explain in detail.

The dude, suffering from a wound

in the thigh, wore Eastern clothes. He was badly frightened, shaken. He confirmed the truth of the letter.

The Bar Y punchers picked up old Jake and the other wounded to take them back to the ranchhouse, and a man headed to town for a doctor.

"This settles it," Surrel said, as they rode toward the girl's ranchhouse. "I savvy it all now, Florrie. Addison must've knowed of the flaw in his title, and tried to git yuh to marry him so's to cinch it. He tried to force yuh, by breakin' yuh, when yuh refused. Guess they stopped one of that lawyer's messengers before. That dude claims a man of theirs disappeared on his way to see yuh some time ago!"

There was deep happiness in Florrie's heart. She knew her spread was saved, and that she would be a wealthy woman now. Jim Surrel put his arm about her waist, pushed his pony close to hers.

A moment later, her lips were pressed to his, and she knew how much she loved him.

"I—I'm shore grateful fer the bullet that brought me to yuh, Florrie darlin'," he said softly.

"I love you, Jim," she whispered back.

Worldly wealth dwindled to nothing.

She knew where her happiness lay as she felt the strong beat of his youthful heart against hers.

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LUDEN'S—A Test Will Tell

# Branding Fire Song Book

By "TEX" BROWN

WELL, my high-stepping serenaders, here's one that's got excitement and loyalty and everything else in it, just like a real cowboy ballad ought to have. I reckon we've been singing about the bravery of the boys and the loyalty and the beauty of the girls long enough to take a little rest from them for long enough at least to give some credit where credit is due.

Plantonio was a brave horse, as brave as any of the men that we've been singing about. And he was pretty too, as pretty as any of the girls we've been singing about. Although, I'm not quite sure that you'd call a gal pretty if she was as black as coal and had a white star in her forehead and a long mane that covered her neck. It's funny how different things are pretty to different people, ain't it?

### *They Don't Come Braver*

At any rate, I reckon you're familiar enough with good hoss flesh by now to know that there just ain't about any braver animal, nor a more loyal one than a good hoss. You've been hearing about them and reading about them, and probably been knowing them first hand long enough to know that.

A hoss will break his heart for you if he is a good animal, and many of them have done it. Going long distances in a hurry when there was trouble in the air like there was when Plantonio made his famous trip, goin' on a long fast run for too long a time will often ruin a hoss, and a man wouldn't do it except in some grave emergency like the one in the song.

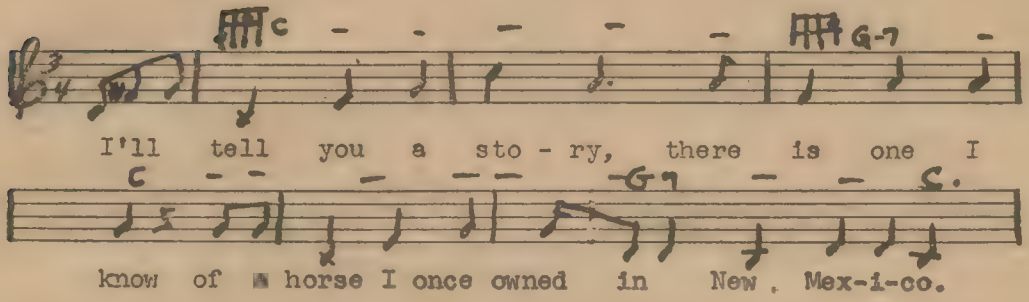
### *Why They Hung Hoss Thieves*

So that's one of the reasons that they hung hoss thieves in the old days but would let a man off for killing another one if he had a halfway decent excuse. After all, a man's hoss was his best friend, and the most important part of his whole equipment. Often the man's life depended on his hoss, and if that animal was no good or was stole by some no good hoss thief then the man was in danger of his life, so you see what a serious crime it was to steal his hoss.

Which don't take into account the just simple friendliness and love that existed between a man and his animal. A spirited hoss is a great comfort to a man when he's alone for long stretches at a time like a cowpoke is. And what with all his other qualities, he sure deserves a good song about him.

So tune up the old boxes and strike off a few verses of Plantonio, in honor of a great hoss.

# PLANTONIO




2. Swift as an antelope, black as a crow,
Star on his forehead was whiter than snow.

3. His arched neck was hidden by a long flowing mane.
They called him Plantonio, The Pride of the Plain.

4. The country was new and the settlers were scarce,
And the Indians on the warpath were savage and fierce.

5. The captain stepped up, said someone must go,
For the aid and protection of New Mexico.

6. "You're good for the ride, you're the lightest one here,
On the back of Plantonio you've nothing to fear."

7. They all shook my hand as I nodded my head,
Rode to the dark prairie and North turned his head.

8. The black struck a trot and he kept it all night
And just as the east was beginning to light,

9. Not a great ways behind there arose a fierce yell,
And I knew that the redskins were hot on my trail.

10. The arrows fell around us like torrents of rain,
Plantonio, Plantonio, The Pride of the Plain.

11. I delivered my message and tried to dismount,
But the pain in my leg was so sharp I could not.

12. The arrow you see hanging there on the wall
Had passed through my leg, stirrup, saddle and all.

13. But with New Mexico saved, we'd not ridden in vain,
Plantonio, Plantonio, the Pride of the Plain.

# Gun Partner

## By A. LESLIE

*Author of*
*"Gold and a Girl," "Gun Waif," etc.*

### CHAPTER I

*The Rifle Shot*

"I'M sorry, Connie, I shore am, but I jest cain't do it!"

"That's final then, Uncle Pete—you can't give me another extension?"

Peter Pardiff, president of the Cochise Bank, shook his grey head regretfully.

"It ain't in my power to do it, Connie," he said. "Yuh see, there's certain rules and reg'lations I'm bound by. Our bank is a small one,

*Connie May*

*There was a crackle of gunshots and just*

## Hell Busts Loose at Monument's Alhambra

*beyond the smudged name appeared an "M"*

*Wade Harley*

## *A Complete Novelette of Trigger Nerve*

and we were hard hit by the drought last summer, and then the bad blizzards broke durin' the winter. Then that robbery last month made things worse.

"The stockholders had to make good for that robbery, Connie. We're skatin' on thin ice as it is, and we cain't take on any more load right now. Them notes of yore dad's is due. They ain't anythin' for me to do but call 'em in."

He didn't look the part of the traditional stern and tight-fisted banker foreclosing the mortgage and turning the helpless girl and her aged parents out into the cold and the snow, did Peter Pardiff. His face was kindly, and so was his heart. Everybody called him "Uncle Pete." Connie May had done so since she was big enough to toddle. So had John May, although he wasn't much younger than Peter Pardiff.

# Saloon When Connie May Takes Charge

Connie knew that Uncle Pete would be glad to do anything he could for John May's daughter. If Peter Pardiff said he could not give her more time to meet the notes for which the Bar M was the security, he couldn't, and that was all there was to it. Connie knew that John May had borrowed the money to buy more stock three years before, when things looked good.

Had John May lived, the notes might possibly have been met when they fell due, although Connie doubted it. The devilish summer and equally devilish winter just past had raised hell with the range. Cattle had died by the thousands. The Bar M was but one of many hard hit.

Some of the ranchers, with large reserves, would weather the storm. It was different with the little fellows. They could not meet their obligations and would have to go.

Connie stood up, twisting her quirt in her slim, sun-golden hands. She was not very big, but slender and lithe, with curves where curves were in order. She passed one hand through her curly dark hair, brushing it back from her white forehead with a gesture strangely reminiscent of her dead father, Pete Pardiff thought.

Setting her broad-brimmed Stetson jauntily atop the clustering curls, she stood up. Her deeply blue eyes were pain filled, but a smile quirked her red lips.

"Then, if I can't pay, you are forced to foreclose and take the ranch?"

"Cal'late that's about it, Connie," admitted Peter Pardiff miserably.

Connie smiled down at him, suddenly very sorry for the old man. Her own troubles were quite forgotten.

"Uncle Peter," she asked gaily, "ever been in the cattle business?"

"Nope," replied Pardiff, puzzled, "never have."

"Well," said Connie, turning and striding lithely toward the door, "you're in it now!"

Connie was right. Peter Pardiff, as president of the Cochise Bank, had a ranch on his hands. Two days later, just as the golden spears of the dawn flung skyward behind the gloomy crests of the Huachucas, Connie May turned her back on the big white ranchhouse in which she had been born, and rode resolutely toward the purple peaks that were tremulously unreal against the far western skyline.

Behind, before and on either side stretched the rolling rangeland, well watered, richly grown with succulent grama grass. For nearly an hour the girl rode across the Bar M spread. It was with a tightening of her throat that she passed a bald knob which marked the western extent of what had been her father's ranch. Just beyond the knob she pulled up her sturdy sorrel, and looked back for a long moment.

THE sun was peeping over the mountain tops now, and waves of saffron light were flowing down their rugged slopes like bright water. The grasses were blue with wind ripples and a-glint with the myriad jewels of the dew. The inner surfaces of cottonwood leaves gleamed pale silver.

Connie drank in the beauty of it and sighed. Then she shrugged her slim shoulders, batted her wide hat jauntily over one blue eye and faced the other way. A throaty little chuckle got past her red lips, and a flash of white teeth.

"Well, Geronimo," she remarked to the sorrel, "there didn't any dashing cowboy hero come riding out of the West, to save the old homestead at the last moment and marry the gal. Guess such things don't happen outside of books.

"Well, I have a notion you and I will make out some way or other. It's a great big world, and there

ought to be room in it for a small girl and a not-very-big horse, don't you think?"

The sorrel tossed his golden head and snorted absolute agreement. He quickened his pace a bit, and the miles began to flow away under his small hoofs. Connie swayed lithely in the saddle, her glance far ahead and her thoughts still farther.

Connie's plans were uncertain. Her immediate objective was the ranch of her aunt and uncle by marriage, about six days' ride to the West. They had, upon learning of the death of her father, urged the girl to come and live with them. Connie, of an independent nature, preferred to make her own way. The loss of the Bar M had not altered her decision. She had consented, however, to a brief visit at the Circle J, her uncle's ranch.

"After that," she mused, "I don't know, but there'll be something."

With the confidence of eighteen, Connie had determined to work her own way, make enough money and buy back the Bar M. She was a daughter of the range, and the thought of a life away from the rolling prairie, the blue mountains and the arid sweep of Arizona's desert land was distasteful to her. For a time, perhaps, if necessity demanded, but for no longer than was absolutely necessary.

CONNIE was traveling light. A few clothes in a saddle pack, and a keepsake or two. Food and a cooking outfit in her saddlebags. In the saddle boot snugged a light rifle, in the use of which she was astonishingly proficient. A cartridge belt encircled her trim waist, and in the holster was a serviceable gun. It was not a regulation six of .45 caliber, but the lighter and almost equally deadly .38.

"A forty-four or a forty-five is too heavy for a gal's hand," her father had told her. "Yuh'll find a thirty-eight hits mighty nigh as hard, and yuh'll handle it a sight better and faster. Learn to place yore shots where yuh aim 'em, and the lighter gun'll serve jest as well."

Connie had "learned to place her shots," and she was fast with the short gun; but her skill with the light rifle was uncanny.

"She kin shoot one slug up in the air and cut it in two with another one afore it kin come down," John May used to say with an admiring chuckle.

Connie camped that night in a cottonwood grove beside a trickle of clear water. She boiled coffee and fried bacon over a tiny fire, baked a doughcake in the grease. The breast of a blue grouse she had shot during the day was broiled daintily over the coals. While the sorrel contentedly munched buffalo grass, the girl enjoyed a meal such as only an "old campaigner" can rustle out of the little end of nothing.

With her boots and saddle for a pillow, Connie rolled up in her blanket, gazed for a while at the bonfire stars of Arizona and then slept until sunlight glinted on the leaves.

Late in the afternoon the rangeland thinned out and merged with the bronze-gold desolation of the desert.

Far off to the south, a silver thread in an emerald tapestry, was the Rio Grande. Beyond loomed the blue mountains of Mexico their grim crags and pinnacles softened by distance.

A lonely, tiny figure in all that immensity, the girl rode on across the whispering sands, past gnarled butte and fantastically carved chimney. It was a sinister land with which the hand of time had dealt harshly. With the sunset flaring redly before her, Connie rode toward where a straggling strip of green bespoke a thin stream of

water. Suddenly she straightened in the saddle.

Faint and wavy with distance, sounded the crack of a rifle. Again and again it snapped wickedly, swiftly drawing nearer, an ominous, menacing sound. Over the quivering soundboard of the sands drifted a whisper of fast hoofs.

## CHAPTER II

### *Done in Blood*

OUT of the flame of the sunset rode a man. He rode drunkenly, swaying and lurching in the saddle, gripping the mane of his splendid black horse. And with him rode the loud, ominous crackle of rifle fire.

The girl, peering with puckered eyes, saw three more figures emerge from the misty red flame. She saw their rifles spurt yellowish fire. She saw also that they wore wide-brimmed steeple sombreros and much silver, from which the bloody sunlight flashed luridly.

Connie's thoughtful black brows drew together slightly and there was a glow in her blue eyes.

"Three Mexicans chasing one American," she muttered. "Say, that doesn't seem just right! He's hit, too; almost ready to drop out of the hull."

On crashed the lone rider, reeling in his saddle. He was almost opposite the girl and a hundred yards to the left when the end came. Suddenly the big black horse bounded convulsively in the air, his legs shooting out stiffly from his body. They buckled limply under him when he came down, and he went end over end like a plugged rabbit.

The rider was hurled out of the saddle to sprawl grotesquely on the sand, writhing feebly. The pursuers whooped with triumph and began pouring shots at the prostrate and wounded man. That was too much!

Connie May went into action. A sharp word, and Geronimo stiffened, motionless. Out of the boot slid the light rifle; the girl's blue eyes glanced along the sights.

The little rifle cracked waspishly, spurting a whirl of blue smoke. A sombrero abruptly took unto itself wings and went sailing through the air. Its owner ducked convulsively with a yell of alarm. Again the rifle cracked, and a second hat whisked from a greasy black head. With a marvelous display of marksmanship, Connie then cut the bridle of one of the riders.

But they were fighters, these dark men from below the Line. On they came, shooting and yelling. Bullets began to storm about Connie. One plucked at her sleeve like a ghostly hand. Another burned the white flesh of her arm.

The rifle barrel twitched slightly, spurted smoke. One of the dark riders screeched with pain and reeled in his saddle, clutching at a smashed shoulder with reddening fingers. Connie drilled the arm of another, sent a streak of crimson leaping across his swarthy cheek.

That was enough for the leading pair.

They whirled their ponies and went thundering back the way they had come, one cursing shrilly, the other reeling and swaying, blood pouring from his broken shoulder.

But the third Mexican, with superb courage, rode straight for that deadly rifle. Connie heard the hammer of her gun click ominously on an empty chamber. The Mexican was scant yards away, his short carbine blazing.

Connie had no time to reload. She dropped the useless rifle and went for her six. She had an awful vision of a dark rage-distorted face, with lips writhing back from yellow, pointed teeth and two flaming black eyes. The fire from the rifle scorched

her hair. Then her own gun boomed sullenly.

One of the terrible eyes suddenly went blank. Blood spurted from it in a hot stream. The Mexican rose in his stirrups, leaned far back and then pitched sideward to the ground. His snorting horse, reins dangling, thundered on past the white-faced girl.

Sick with horror, Connie lowered her smoking gun. Mechanically she ejected the spent cartridge and thrust a fresh one into the cylinder. Then she holstered the gun with a shaking hand. The two wounded Mexicans were fading into the distance.

There was no need to waste a glance on the third one, who lay with his bloody face buried in the sand. Connie knew that. She didn't want to look, anyway. Shuddering, she turned her gaze toward the wounded fugitive, who was trying to prop himself up on a feeble elbow. With an exclamation of pity she dropped from the hull and hurried toward him.

HE was a middle-aged man with a white face and nervous, waxen hands. His eyes were coldly grey, his mouth tight. He was dressed in black corduroy pantaloons stuffed into brightly polished black boots, with a long black coat, white shirt and black string tie. Blood dripped from the fingers of one hand; his coat sleeve was drenched with it. There was also a slight smudge on the white linen over his left breast.

Connie, who had seen and cared for more than one gunshot wound, deftly opened the shirt and glanced at the small blue hole from which a few drops of blood oozed sluggishly. Her brows drew together and her red lips tightened.

The wounded man struggled up onto the elbow of his crippled arm, wincing with pain as he did so. He nodded response to the girl's look.

"Yeah, I'm done for," he panted. "Jest a matter of minutes."

"It isn't bleeding much," Connie said, expressing a hope she did not feel.

"Bleedin' internally," gasped the other. "I kin feel myself fillin' up inside. No, there ain't no use foolin' with it. The arm? Jest a scratch, don't mean nothin'."

He coughed violently and a bloody froth showed on his lips. Connie wiped it away with her handkerchief.

The man nodded again.

"That's comin' from the lungs," he gulped. He turned his cold eyes to the girl's face.

"Say, yuh're a game one, all right," he praised her. "It was damn fine of yuh to drive them hellions off. They got me, but yuh kept 'em from slicin' me up in little pieces afore I cashed in. Yeah, they do them things.

"That was 'Concha Mike' Martinez whose shoulder yuh busted; him and two of his horned toads. Pity it wasn't Mike yuh drilled dead center. Yuh gotta look out, sister; that greaser ain't the kind to forgit. He'll do for yuh if he ketches yuh!"

The dying man coughed again and settled back a little. He appeared to be thinking. A flicker of animation crossed his pallid face.

"I'm gonna do somethin' for yuh," he said. "Yuh live hereabouts? What yuh doin', Miss, ridin' 'round in the desert thisaway?"

Connie told him in a few words. He nodded more vigorously.

"Fine," he panted. "Yuh sorta at loose ends, eh?" A pause. "Hell, I gotta have somethin' to write with! Jerk a thorn loose from that cholla over there and bring it here, Miss."

Wondering, Connie procured the needle-sharp spine. When she turned back, the wounded man had ripped a square from his white shirt and was smoothing it out with trembling fingers.

"Gimme it," he mumbled, reaching for the thorn.

Connie's eyes widened and she shivered as he dipped the point of the thorn in the blood that dripped from his left hand and began painfully to form letters on the white cloth.

"What's yore name?" he asked. Connie told him, and he went on writing, the trembling fingers moving slowly and more slowly. With a last burst of strength he inscribed his signature, then sank back against the girl's supporting arm.

"Read!" he panted, gesturing feebly at the red-smeared cloth.

Connie hated to take hold of the grisly thing, but she forced herself to do so.

This is my will (she read). I know what I'm doing and I'm in my right mind. I'm giving to the lady who's carrying this—Connie May—my half interest in my place, the Alhambra, and my half of the money in the bank. Sheriff Bill Cummings, look after this for me.

(Signed) Bart Woodson.

"It ain't in jest the way law jiggers would do it, and she ain't plumb legal 'cause they ain't no witnesses," muttered the dying man, "but folks over to Monument'll see things is done like I want 'em, 'specially when Bill Cummings okays it.

"Miss, yuh hunt up Sheriff Bill in Monument—half a day's ride west. Monument's the new silver-minin' town. Tell—tell him Concha Mike followed me outa town and caught up with me. Tell him what—yuh—did. Here—take—"

He fumbled a buckskin sack from his pocket and pressed it into the girl's hand.

"Gittin'—dark," he murmured, "and—and—awful—cold—"

Bart Woodson coughed again, blood foaming over his lips; stiffened, reared his body up and then went limp. Two minutes later he was dead.

Connie managed to scrape out a shallow grave in the loose sand. She wrapped Woodson as best she could in a blanket taken from the dead Mexican's horse, tumbled the body into the grave and covered it with sand. Then she carried loose boulders from some distance and heaped them over and around the low mound.

"That ought to save him from the coyotes," she decided.

FULL dark had fallen before Connie straightened her aching back from the dreary task. The Mexican's sturdy little mustang, with the rig removed, she left behind when she rode toward the straggle of green, knowing that the resourceful animal could fend for itself. She could not bring herself to touch the body of the Mexican, and she shuddered whenever she glanced in its direction.

Beside the little stream that wound through the grove Connie made a belated camp. It was not until she had finished her supper and spread her blanket that she thought of the buckskin pouch which, along with the fantastic will, she had stowed away in a pocket. The sack contained more than a hundred dollars in gold.

"I wonder what the Alhambra is?" she mused, gingerly handling the bit of cloth whose words were written in the blood of a dead man. "A store, I imagine. He wasn't a rancher, that's sure. Dressed like I've seen storekeepers dress. Well, I guess I'll ride for that town he called Monument in the morning.

"I doubt if anybody will do anything but laugh at this will, but I have to tell the sheriff what happened. I doubt if I will even be allowed to keep this money."

Connie wondered what had become of the two wounded Mexicans, and recalled the dead man's warning. She gave it little heed, however. The chance that the two men

would ever cross her path again was small, she reasoned.

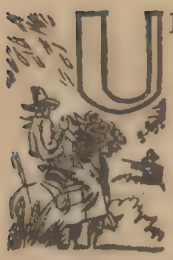
Had she at that very moment been able to overhear a conversation taking place in a dirty little hut just across the Rio Grande, she would not have been so easy in her mind. Groaning on a bunk, his wounded shoulder rudely bandaged and aching abominably, Concha Mike Martinez cursed at three swarthy, hard-eyed men grouped around him as he gave them orders.

"Run her down!" he rasped in Spanish. "When you catch her, bring her to me. Fail me in this and I will have some things to say to you—things to which it will not please you to listen!"

He struggled to a sitting position and glared at his followers, his little black eyes burning like live coals. The three *vaqueros* shifted their feet uneasily and avoided his gaze.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Alhambra*



UNCERTAIN as to the exact location of her goal, Connie May did not catch her first glimpse of Monument until late in the afternoon. The mining town, perched in the shadow of dark, unlovely hills, sprawled like the untidy skirts of a drunken woman. It was built on a spur of the hills that stretched like a lion's paw into the desert. Above it hung a shifting cloud of smoke belched from the chimneys of its huge stamp mills.

Long before she reached the outskirts of the town, Connie could hear the mutter and rumble of the ponderous pestles, churning the tough silver ore to a sticky paste from which the precious metal was extracted.

Even from a distance, the town had a vicious and dissolute look. At its feet stretched the clean, hard beauty of the desert. Behind it the hills loomed austere and gloomy, but not without a certain sinister charm. But the town itself coiled along the spur like a broken-backed rattler.

Night was still some hours away when Connie rode up the crooked main street. Already, however, lights in saloon, dancehall and gambling hell glowed with a sickly radiance, striving feebly against the bars of sunlight that streamed through dirty window panes.

Crowds were swirling in the street, colorful in varied costume. Mexicans in gay serapes rubbed shoulders with brawny miners in blue or red shirts. Lithe cowboys strode along with the erect gait of men who spent their lives in the saddle. Here and there an Indian with sullen, mutinous eyes slid through the crowd as though greased, clad in fringed buckskin, high boot-moccasins and dingy white turban.

Voices rose in raucous argument. Laughter shrilled from the dancehalls, where already boots were clumping and high heels clicking. Somebody was bellowing an uncouth song.

Connie threaded her way among rumbling ore wagons and mule-drawn carts, loaded with portly silver bricks. Mounted punchers clattered past, their eyes sliding sidelong glances at the trim girl. A *vaquero* grinned in a friendly fashion, his teeth flashing white in his dark face. Connie nodded to him and pulled Geronimo to a halt.

"The sheriff's office, senor," she said. "You know where I can find it?"

The Mexican swept his sombrero low in courtly salute.

"Assuredly, senorita," he replied. "I have been there"—making a wry face. "Eet and the jail, they are in the same building. Turn at the next corner and ride to the left."

Connie thanked him and rode on.

She entered a quieter side street and a few minutes later pulled up in front of a squat little building with barred windows. Leaving Geronimo hitched to a sunbeam, she walked through the door marked "Office."

Two pairs of booted feet thumped hastily from table top to floor as she entered. The owners of the feet stared at her in surprise.

One was a tall old man, with frosty eyes and a drooping grizzled mustache. On his vest was pinned a silver star. The other was squat and broad, with a round moon-face that appeared to consist chiefly of grin wrinkles. He had twinkling little brown eyes and red hair. He wore a star marked "Deputy."

"HOWDY, ma'am," said the sheriff, dropping his hat to the table. "Anythin' I kin do for yuh? Here, have a chair."

Connie liked the sheriff; he reminded her somewhat of Peter Pardiff, though in a more vigorous way. She sat down and told her story, simply and without waste of words. Before she had finished, the sheriff was striding up and down the room, breathing words under his mustache, and the deputy was sitting erect, as a ramrod in his chair.

"So they got Bart!" exploded the sheriff when the girl paused. "I warned him agin headin' for Tucson alone. Right after he had that run-in with Concha Mike, I warned him. That half-bred hellion is pizenous as a rattler! Jest wait till I line sights with *him*. I'll do my arrestin' and ask questions afterwards!"

"I've a notion he was badly wounded," Connie interjected hopefully. The sheriff said something under his breath that smelled of sulphur.

"His kind is tough as a steer's hide in fly time," he declared. "Bart Woodson told yuh right, young lady. That hellion'll be up and lookin' for yuh afore yuh'd believe it—and not with no opera glass, either! Did pore ol' Bart have anythin' else to say afore he cashed in?"

Connie drew the buckskin sack and the will from her pocket and handed both to the sheriff.

"He gave me these," she said simply, "and told me to look you up."

The sheriff glanced at the contents of the sack, nodded, and unfolded the bit of cloth. For a long minute he stared at the rusty red lettering. Then he glanced at the girl. The deputy peered over his shoulder and whistled softly under his breath.

"Well?" said Connie.

Sheriff Cummings tightened the pucker string of the sack and handed it to her.

"Cal'late this is yore'n, ma'am," he said. "Likewise, this here last will and testament 'pears sorta authentic. I'm purty nigh certain this's Bart's signature, and the wordin' don't leave no manner of doubt as to jest what he intended. Looks to me like yuh own a half interest in the Alhambra."

He turned to the deputy. "Mournful," he ordered, "yuh mosey down to the Alhambra and git Wade Harley. Tell him to hustle over here, pronto. Wade'll know Bart's signature for plumb certain. He'll want to know about this, anyway, and about Bart bein' killed off. Hustle, yuh work dodger!"

Mournful Mooney, the deputy, departed hurriedly, and then the sheriff questioned Connie about herself.

"I knowed Pete Pardiff onct," he commented when he'd heard her story. "That was when the county seat was over to Radford and I was deppity to Sheriff Carnes. Nice feller, Pete. Nope, I didn't cal'late to know yore dad. I ain't never been round the Cochise range country. That's jest t'other side of the county line, yuh know—well, reckon that's Wade Harley comin' now."

Mournful Mooney entered the room a moment later. With him was

a tall young man with steady grey eyes, black hair, a lean, bronzed face and a rather stern mouth. He was broad of shoulder, slim of waist and flat of hip. He cast a questioning glance at Connie and addressed the sheriff.

"Yuh wanted to see me, Bill?"

The sheriff nodded to Connie. "Tell him about it," he prompted.

CONNIE told her story a second time. As she proceeded, Harley's eyes grew icy and knots of muscle rippled along his lean jaw. His strong, sun-tanned hands tightened into iron-hard fists. He made no threats, however.

"I'm on the lookout for Concha, don't yuh worry," remarked the sheriff, interpreting Harley's expression. "Yuh don't need to go takin' the law in yore own hands. Take a squint at this, Wade," he added before the other could speak. "Would yuh say this is Bart's way of signin' his name?"

Harley glanced at the bloody signature; the sheriff's hand covered the rest of the writing.

"Shore," he replied instantly, his voice hard and measured with the emotion that still swayed him. "Shore that's his signature! I'd know it in a million. How come he wrote it on that rag in red ink?"

"That ain't ink," grunted the sheriff; "that's blood—Bart Woodson's blood. Wade, I want yuh to know Miss Connie May, here, who's yore new pardner."

Harley stared at the sheriff as if he considered the officer had suddenly gone mad.

"What in blazes yuh talkin' about?" he demanded.

Without comment, Sheriff Cummings held out the stained bit of cloth. Harley read the words and his face turned darkly red.

"Well, if this ain't jest about the locoest thing I ever heard tell of!" he exploded.

"May seem that way to yuh," remarked the sheriff, "but I cal'late it didn't seem that way to Bart. This little lady saved him from Concha Mike's knives and cholla cactus spines. Mike has ways of keepin' a gent alive for quite a spell when he'd rather be dead," the sheriff said grimly.

"Mike didn't feel very kind-like toward Bart for shootin' that knife outa his hand and a part of his finger along with it. Yeah, I cal'late Bart did feel sorta grateful to the little lady."

"Yuh mean to say yuh figger this damn thing would stand up as a will?"

The sheriff shrugged. "It's writ out plumb proper, so far as I kin see it, and yuh admit yoreself that it was Bart what signed it. I cal'late a cow and minin' country jury would look at it sorta that way, too, everythin' considered, if it come to a test. Yeah, I cal'late yuh got a new pardner, Wade."

In the face of Harley's undoubted hostility, Connie began to lose all interest in the Alhambra, whatever it was. She had no desire to associate with a man who apparently disliked the idea heartily. She opened her lips to tell the sheriff so, when Harley interrupted, his voice harsh with anger.

"A gal pardner in the Alhambra!" he almost snarled, "and a half growed one at that! She wouldn't last ten minutes! It takes gu—er—nerve to handle that job! It's a man's job!"

Connie May had Irish blue eyes, and she had an Irish temper. She had inherited her dark hair from her mother, but her ability to blaze high and handsome had come from her red-headed dad. She saw red right now.

Lithe as a startled panther, she was on her feet. Her curly head came hardly to Harley's broad shoulder, but her eyes blazed into his.

When she spoke, however, her voice was singularly soft and quiet.

"If what the sheriff says is true and I'm entitled to a half interest in the property, whatever it is, I'm going to claim it," she said. "Now there's no use for you to start ranting and swearing. You can accept me as a partner and like it, or not like it, just as you see fit. But I'm your partner, just the same!"

Wade Harley glared down at her, his face purple. He swallowed convulsively, started to speak, changed his mind. The blood left his face and his mouth tightened. His eyes lost their hot glow and became icy once more. He turned and strode to the door.

"All right!" he flung over his shoulder. "Come along, and take a look at yore property!"

With that he was out the door. Connie smiled at the sheriff, murmured a word of thanks and followed. Leading her horse, she walked beside Harley to the corner. Together they turned down the blaring main street. A score of steps, and Harley paused. They were standing in front of a building with swinging doors.

Music blared through the open windows, and the click of roulette wheels, the slither of cards one against the other, the shuffle of dancing feet and the clink of bottle necks against glasses formed a colorful background. The smell of tobacco smoke and the reek of spilled whiskey came out with the noise. Not the least disconcerting to the girl was the screech of high-pitched feminine laughter.

Harley shoved her through the swinging doors and into the crowded room. Bewildered she glanced about. A garish sign above the long black bar caught her eye.

MONUMENT'S BIGGEST
AND BADDEST
THE ALHAMBRA

For a crawling moment Connie stood rooted to the spot.

"A—a saloon!" she gasped at last.

"Uh-huh," drawled Wade Harley, "a saloon. Like a gamblin' house and a dancehall. We got good whiskey, *straight* games, and—women!"

Connie wet her lips. The short-skirted girls swaying in the arms of burly miners or lithe plainsmen held her gaze, fascinated. She tore her glance away and saw men lining the long bar three deep. Others crowded about the roulette wheels, shoved up to the faro bank or sat silently at poker tables. Some glanced questioningly in her direction. Connie felt cold, then hot all over. She half turned to the door. Wade Harley laughed harshly.

"Sorta cal'lated I knowed what I was talkin' about when I said yuh wouldn't last ten minutes. Nope, I didn't; I'd oughta said ten *seconds*."

His voice dripped with contempt that seared the girl's ears like hot oil. She swung away from the door, her small body tense, her eyes blue flame in her paper-white face.

"Yes," she said softly, "you were wrong. You should have said ten *years!*"

## CHAPTER IV

### *Ace of Diamonds*

MORE and more men were turning to stare at the pair just inside the swinging doors. Newcomers glanced curiously at them as they brushed past on their way to bar or table. Some nodded to Harley. Suddenly he let out a shout.

"Line the bar, gents, and fill 'em up! I got somethin' to say!"

Men hurried to accept the invitation, with the exception of some of the more earnest gamesters at the tables. These glanced up querulously,

annoyed by the interruption. Giggling girls from the dance floor hung onto their partners' arms and crowded along with the rest.

Perspiring bartenders knocked the necks off bottles rather than take time to draw corks, and sloshed raw whiskey over the splinters into ready glasses. Harley waited until the bustle and argument had died down to a hum. He raised his hand and silence followed.

"Bart Woodson had a run-in with Concha Mike Martinez," he announced without preamble. "Bart lost the argufyin'."

Voices began to hum again at this, but Harley silenced the rising uproar with a gesture.

"Yuh all know Bart owned half this outfit," he went on. "He never had no folks what anybody knowed about, and he allus did have sorta funny notions. Anyhow, he writ out a will afore he cashed in, and Bill Cummings says he cal'lates it'll stand up. 'Cordin' to which, I reckon the Alhambra has got a new half owner. Here she is." He gestured carelessly in Connie's direction.

UNDER the concentrated stare of the crowd, Connie's cheeks flushed hotly.

A dancehall girl giggled and a drunken miner guffawed. It was not what Harley said, but the way in which he said it that intimated plainly that the situation was none of his making and decidedly obnoxious to him.

The crowd sensed this, and its interest was tinged with amusement and faint hostility. Harley was undoubtedly popular. Also, doubtless, the idea of a woman owner did not appeal to the customers.

"Cal'late yuh'll hafta change the readin' of that sign over the bar, Wade," shouted a voice.

Connie glanced at the sign. Beneath the huge lettering she read:

HARLEY AND WOODSON
Proprietors

Wade Harley also stared at the sign, his face darkening.

"I'll change it!" he growled, and his hand flashed to his side.

His heavy six left the holster spitting flame and smoke. Across the name "Woodson" leaped a closely spaced line of dark holes, almost completely smudging it out. Harley ejected the spent shells, stuffed in fresh ones and slid the gun back into its sheath. He grinned sarcastically at Connie as the crowd roared hilarious approval.

The blue-eyed girl stepped forward a pace, her red lips firm. Something in her glance brought silence. Her clear voice rang out.

"Pretty good, but not good enough," she said, and her own gun leaped from its holster.

There was a crackle of reports, and just beyond the smudged name of dead Bart Woodson appeared a neat "M", done in bullet holes.

Even more swiftly than had Harley, the girl reloaded her gun. Again the crackle of reports, and an "A" joined the "M". A third time the .38 spurted fire through the smoke wreaths. In silence the crowd stared at the sign. It now read:

HARLEY AND MAY

A roar shattered the silence. Men slapped their thighs and howled with delight. Even the die-hard gamblers at the poker tables grinned their appreciation. The dancehall girls waved friendly and admiring greetings to the new "boss." Only Wade Harley's handsome face showed a scowl. Connie turned to him, her voice crisp.

"I've been riding since before dawn," she said. "Where can I find a stable for my horse and something to eat for myself?"

Harley glared at her. "Harelip Henderson runs a stable and he's got

a eatin' house jest 'crost the street. It's the first street t'other side the one what the sheriff's office is on. Harelip has some rooms to rent over his restaurant. Harelip ain't much to look at but he keeps things clean and decent."

The girl nodded curt thanks. Harley scowled at her again. "Cal'late yuh're sorta tuckered," he added surlily. "Yuh better pound yore ear tonight and show up round here tomorrow afternoon. I'll give yuh a accountin' of how things stand then, and yuh kin take Bart's place tomorrow night, if yuh don't change yore mind 'tween now and then."

There was a sneer in the last remark that tightened Connie's lips.

"I imagine I can trust you alone for one night," she said sweetly, and was gone. Behind her, Harley gasped like a newly landed fish.

"T-trust me alone for one night!" he gurgled. "Why—why that—"

At the corner Connie shook her head and frowned. "No, I most assuredly do not like him. He's perfectly unbearable—a regular spoiled child!"

Suddenly she laughed aloud at the remembrance of Harley's face as her last words sank in.

"Geronimo," she remarked irrelevantly, "I bet you a bagful of oats that he's got an awfully nice mouth, if he'd only smile!"

Wade Harley was not smiling the following afternoon. When he had finished talking, however, Connie was familiar with the affairs of the Alhambra. Harley held back nothing.

"Half the money in the bank is yore'n," he concluded. "Yuh kin draw it out or do whatever yuh have a mind to do with it. Bart and me was lettin' it pile up, cal'latin' on buyin' us a cow factory some time, but I reckon that's out now."

Connie glanced at his lean face curiously. "You're a cowman?" she asked.

"Usta be," Harley grunted. "Drought and blizzards wiped me out. Made a little stake minin' and got into this business jest as Monument started growin' up. Bart was allus a gambler but he wanted to git out. He had a run-in with Concha Mike Martinez last month."

Harley's eyes were hard. "Mike dropped a passel of pesos on the wheel and got ugly. Went for a knife, and Bart pulled his derringer and shot it outa his hand. Bart was warned Concha'd try to even things up— Well, yuh wanta draw the money?"

Connie's big eyes were deep pools of violet light. For a moment she stared out the open window and into the blue distance.

"No," she replied thoughtfully, at length, "I think I'll just let that money stay there for a while."

Harley stared at her, his glance hostile. "All right," he agreed shortly.

THE little room over Harelip Henderson's restaurant was clean and neat, the narrow bed comfortable; but Connie had not slept well. The continuous uproar in the street kept her awake. Drunken shouts, loud laughter, occasional pistol shots combined to make the night raucous with sound. To the range-bred girl, accustomed to the vast and brooding silences of the wind-swept prairie, it was turmoil indescribable.

Nearly as bad was the big smoky saloon, as the long shadows crept down the mountain slopes and the room began to fill up. Harley paid not the least attention to the girl. She grew hot under the stares of the customers and for the moment was utterly at a loss what to do.

The head bartender, a pleasant-faced young man, sensed her embarrassment.

"Ma'am, if yuh ain't busy right now, would yuh mind lookin' after

the cash drawer and makin' change?" he suggested diffidently, glancing toward where Wade Harley stood on the far side of the room, with his back turned.

Connie accepted the task gratefully. With something to do, her confidence returned. With swift, sure fingers she made change. From time to time she resorted to the little gold scales as a hairy prospector from the hills planked a poke of dust on the bar or a handful of dull-colored nuggets. The head bartender nodded his approval.

"THE new boss is shore ketchin' holt," he confided to an assistant. "Gosh! Ain't she purty!"

"Purtier'n a spotted yearlin'," the other agreed. "Did yuh notice how them eyes of hers blazed up last night when she shot her name on that sign? Feller, I wouldn't wanta stand in front of that hogleg of hers when she's riled up!"

"Uh-huh," nodded the head drink juggler. "And yuh'll notice she carries a knife on t'other side that holster belt. Wonder if she kin use it as fancy as she does the Colt?"

He found out before the night was over. Connie was busy "breaking up" a gold piece when she sensed eyes on her. Looking up, she beheld Harley on the far side of the bar.

"The dealer on the big poker table ain't showed up," he remarked coldly. "Woodson usta spell them tables when there was a vacancy. I ain't much on handlin' cyards; sides, I got other things to look after. Yuh happen to know a ace from a deuce?"

Connie rose to her feet and nodded to the head bartender, who had finished with his stock and was back on the job.

"I'll take the deal," she said quietly and headed for the poker table.

John May had been fond of poker and had taught his daughter the game. Often he sat late with his cowboys in a sociable bout at the ranchhouse. On these occasions Connie often dealt for them. So when she sat down at the big table in the corner, it was with no nervousness or uncertainty.

"Don't forgit," Harley drawled, "we run straight games here. If yuh see any gent tryin' to run a whizzer, call me and I'll handle him for yuh."

"I can handle anything that comes up at my table myself!" Connie flared.

Harley hesitated, started to say something and evidently thought better of it. There was a puzzled expression in his eyes as he walked away.

The stakes were high at Connie's table. Not long after she sat down, one of the players was cleaned out. He rose from his chair.

"Guess that'll be all for me tonight, boys," he remarked.

"Wait," said the girl. Her slim hand shoved a stack of chips across the table.

"A first-class game always sets a a player in a stack when he's cleaned," she remarked. "See if you can get your money back."

A hum of approval went around the table. The players began taking decidedly more interest in their dealer. Wade Harley, watching from across the room, frowned darkly but said nothing.

There was a vacant chair at the table. A little later Harley strolled over and dropped into it.

"See if yuh kin take the house over, boys," he remarked pleasantly, buying a stack. There was a glint of something almost like amusement in his eyes as the girl shoved the chips across the table to him.

Harley played a good game, but his mind did not appear to be on his cards. He did not win, neither did he lose to amount to anything.

A big pot built up. Harley was in

it. He glanced at Connie, hesitated, and dropped two cards from his hand, shoving them into the discard with a swift, smooth gesture.

"I'll take two," he remarked, laying one bronzed hand flat on the table top.

Connie flipped the cards toward him. Harley reached for them with one hand and started to lift the other from the table. Something flashed a streak of flame through the lamplight.

*"Gawdamighty!"*

Harley yelled with the surprise. With bulging eyes he stared at his hand, pinned to the table by a long knife driven through the shirt sleeve. The girl dealer's voice bit at him through the uproar.

"You asked for it," she said. "This is a straight game and palming an ace doesn't go, even to show the dealer up."

"Yuh—yuh hellcat!" Harley gasped.

Connie ripped the knife free then. Under Harley's palm was a single card. Connie flipped it over with the knife point. It was the ace of diamonds!

## CHAPTER V

### *Lead and Flame*

LOUD laughter ringing in his ears, Wade Harley left the room, his face paper-white. Connie stared after him, her big eyes dark. Her rose-red lips were a little grey.

"I—I hope I didn't embarrass him too much," she murmured under her breath.

A keen-eared old cowman who overheard, chuckled beside her.

"Don't yuh worry, ma'am," he comforted. "Yuh only upset the inside of him a bit. Wade's a salty proposition, and he's been the big skookum he-wolf of these diggin's for quite a spell; don't nobody care to tangle with him. He's gonna be sore inside him for quite some days, I cal'late. But don't yuh bother yore head much about it."

The old fellow's eyes were as keen as his ears. He glanced at the girl, recalled Harley's look when he stumbled away from the table, and chuckled under his mustache.

"I cal'late yuh've both got a hurt right now what ain't never gonna git well," he murmured to himself. "Only yuh don't either one know it yet. Hell, it's shore fine to be young!"

Connie was still at the table when Wade Harley, heedless of the chuckling crowd, walked over to her for the second time that night.

"Yuh was right—I had it comin'," he said abruptly. "Sorry I tried to pull a whizzer on yuh; it won't happen again."

He turned to the crowd, his eyes cold. "But that don't mean it'll be healthy for any jigger to figger *he* kin run some kind of a whizzer round here," he remarked softly. Under that bleak stare, the laughter and the sly remarks were stilled.

Days passed. Business boomed at the Alhambra. "There shore ain't no doubt 'bout it, yuh're packin' 'em in," Harley admitted to Connie. "Cal'late everybody in the district wants a look at the gun-slingin' Alhambra lady. We're makin' money."

Connie nodded soberly. "I don't care for the life, though," she replied. "I want to get back on the range. I don't get a chance to ride hardly at all any more; Geronimo's getting fat. I want to ride herd again, and twirl a rope, and eat from a chuck wagon."

Harley gazed down at her from his great height. Something in his look suddenly caused the girl's dark lashes to flutter down until they rested against her softly rounded, creamily tanned cheeks. The rose color in her cheeks deepened.

Through the silken curtain of her lashes she abruptly flashed a timid look at him.

Harley drew a deep breath, turned and walked away. Connie's blue eyes opened wide, and in their clear depths was something very like disappointment.

The end of the month drew near and business slacked off. It was a long time since payday at the mines and the ranches. Soon, however, another payday would fall. The Alhambra took advantage of the slack season to get ready for the coming harvest.

"Reckon we might as well call it a day," Harley remarked one night as the small hours of morning drew near. "Nobody here but them three jiggers over at the faro bank, and they ain't spendin' hardly nothin'."

OF the three men in question, two were Mexicans. The third was a blocky individual with a long scar stretching from the corner of his bloodless mouth to the angle of his unshaven jaw. From time to time he cast a glance at the dark rectangle of the door. There was but one man behind the bar. The poker tables were covered, the roulette wheels motionless.

Connie went behind the bar to check the cash drawer. A gold piece fell to the floor and she stooped to recover it. She could see the glint of it underneath the bar.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed, dropping to her knees and reaching in among a jumble of empty bottles.

At that instant three men entered the saloon. They were lean swarthy men with dark eyes glinting in the shadow of their sombreros. As Wade Harley turned toward them, a gun cracked from the direction of the faro table. Harley grunted queerly and went down in a heap, blood wetting his black hair.

The bartender, accustomed to emergencies, seized a sawed-off shotgun and flung it to his shoulder. Guns roared from the doorway and the man went down with three bullets through him. The shotgun fell from his dead hands and clattered toward the end of the bar.

Connie, still on her knees under the bar, was stunned by the roar of gunfire. She started to spring erect, then shrank back as a harsh voice spewed Spanish curses.

"That does for both of them!" exclaimed the voice. "Now, where ees that little wildcat what shoot my shoulder?"

"Behind ze bar!" shouted another man. "Haul her out, Concha, queeckly; we must ride before the sheriff comes!"

"Get the money," ordered the first voice.

Connie went cold all over. Bart Woodson's warning flashed through her mind; also the things Harley and others had told her of Concha Mike Martinez and his methods. For an instant, sheer panic seized her as feet clumped toward the bar. She moved slightly and her hand touched cold metal.

It was the dead bartender's shotgun. The feel of the smooth steel sent a surge of confidence through the girl. Just as a man rushed around the end of the bar, she stood up, the shotgun gripped in her slim hands.

"Here she ees!" yelled an exultant voice.

Connie let go with the shotgun. The roar in the confined space was deafening. With a yell the man went down, kicking and groveling. Connie swung the gun around and fired the second barrel at a figure leaping the bar. A bullet clipped a curl from her dark head. Another grazed her cheek. She crouched back from the bar and drew her light Colt.

The saloon seemed to fairly explode with gunfire. Bullets smashed bottles and shivered the mirror to a thousand fragments. One slammed

through a big hanging lamp. Oil spurted forth and instantly caught fire. A sheet of flame licked the tinder-dry ceiling.

Shot for shot, the white-faced girl answered the Mexican outlaws. She downed one man, broke the arm of a second. Then her gun was empty. Frantically she tried to reload. Over the bar leaped Concha Mike and his remaining henchman. Connie reached for her knife, but a sinewy hand seized her wrist and twisted it cruelly. She screamed as Concha Mike's long arms closed about her.

Then, over the bar, came a horrible figure, blood streaking its features, grey eyes blazing like fire under ice. Fingers like rods of nickel steel wrapped about Concha Mike's scrawny neck. A second hand gripped his partially healed shoulder. Concha's howl of agony choked to a gurgle, a gasp. His head was twisted sharply and there was a sound like the snapping of a dry stick. The bandit's head lolled on his shoulder.

Wade Harley flung the dead man from him, whirled to meet the last Mexican's rush. He caught the wrist of a descending knife hand and an instant later the two crashed to the floor together.

THE Mexican was a big man, tall as Harley and pounds heavier. Harley, blood still seeping from his creased scalp, clung desperately to the corded wrist and with his free hand snapped short, vicious blows at the other's face. Over and over they rolled, striking, kicking, gasping. Embers from the blazing ceiling dropped upon them. Smoke swirled in acrid clouds.

The Mexican's greater weight was telling. Suddenly Harley's hand came to rest on a glowing ember. Instinctively he writhed away from the burn of it, and the Mexican got his chance. He whirled the lighter man over, tore his wrist free and flung up the glittering knife. But even as his arm tensed for the blow, the barrel of Connie's Colt crashed against his skull. With a groan he slumped over.

Harley wriggled from under Concha Mike's body and staggered to his feet. A whole section of the burning ceiling fell in then with a roar. Connie, exhausted, strangling with smoke, sank to the floor in a pathetic little heap. Harley swept her up in his arms and staggered for the door.

With the last remnants of his strength Harley made it, pitching through the doorway into the arms of shouting men, who were running up from all directions. They hurried him away from the burning building, the girl still clasped closely in his arms. When he paused at a safe distance, she opened her blue eyes and looked up into his. His arms tightened about her—

"It's a mighty purty pitcher," remarked a familiar voice a little later, "but sparks is fallin' all over the two of yuh. I suggest movin' on a spell. 'Sides, yore scalp's bleedin'."

Harley set the blushing Connie on her feet and grinned at the sheriff.

"Plumb forgot all about it," he chuckled. "Jest a scratch, anyhow."

"You're going right straight to the doctor and have it taken care of," Connie said firmly.

"Yessum," agreed Harley meekly.

At the corner they turned and glanced back at the fire.

"Well, there goes our business, honey," he remarked.

"We've still got the money in the bank," Connie reminded him. "Listen, dear," she added quickly. "With what we've both got, there's enough to buy back my Bar M from the Cochise Bank. It's a good range and will pay if it's run right."

Harley grinned down at her. "And we'll still be pardners?" he asked.

Connie smiled, her blue eyes starry.

"Partners always!" she murmured happily.

# Rustlers' Gal

*Reed heaved the table toward Burr*

## *Stolen Cattle and Rustlers Are Forgotten as a Dance Hall Girl Corrals Dave Reed's Heart!*

## By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

*Author of "Babs, the Untamed," "Desert Silver," etc.*

DAVE REED was crouching behind the edge of the woods that lined the river beside the Star Cattle Company's shipping pens. The darkness about him was occasionally split by forked tongues of lightning, and the roar of guns beat down on his ears through the rain-whipped night.

New on the job, hired as a gun-hand a scant ten hours before, Reed was finding quickly that he would have to earn his money. He and five more men had been sent down here to the pens by the river just at dusk to guard the herd of bawling, frightened shippers. Guard them with their lives, if necessary.

It had been necessary in a hurry. Somewhere out there in the darkness five other men were fighting with a full twenty men who had suddenly

swooped down upon them through the woods that lined the river.

The bark and flash of pistols added to the din of the thunder and the bawling of the cattle restricted to a tight herd in the wire enclosure. And it sounded as though his buddies were losing. Reed would have left his post by the ford where the foreman had stationed him, but he had been cautioned not to. He was to stay there and cut off the rustlers if they started to drive the herd that way.

He had popped a cartridge at every dark form that had been identifiable as one of the attackers, and now his ammunition was getting low. The last cartridge was in the chamber of his rifle.

SOME instinct made him look up from his crouching position with sudden suspicion. A slicker-clad figure was looming over him, appearing with a suddenness that made him gulp. He jumped aside instinctively as he brought his rifle around.

A shot roared almost in his face, and Reed automatically squeezed his own trigger. As he dodged behind a tree, the horse carrying the slicker-clad figure squealed and toppled over, wounded by that rifle shot. The rider tumbled forward over the animal's neck with a loud cry. Reed froze in his tracks as he heard the cry. It was the voice of a girl.

The figure hit the ground with a heavy thump just as a blinding flash of lightning revealed her to Reed. She lay in a heap, fragile and motionless in a little rivulet of rainwater under a tree. The flash of lightning burned that sight of the pretty face into Reed's brain as the light of the sun stamps a print on a photographic negative. It did more than that. It brought recognition to him.

He had seen the girl before. The recollection came to him instantly. She was the singer at the saloon in Bluewater, where he had stopped to inquire about work, and from whence he had been directed to the Star spread.

But the image of the girl that the lightning burned into his brain did more than that. It burned the image of her on his emotions. He couldn't account for it, but he felt some strange attraction toward the figure that lay in the puddle of rainwater beside her dying horse. The feeling troubled him, made him vaguely uncomfortable. But there she lay in the darkness now, a dance hall singer who had come into the mad night with a rustler's gang and had fallen at his feet under rifle fire.

All these things affected Dave Reed for only a fleeting moment, and he was hardly conscious that he thought about them. He leaned his rifle against a tree and quickly was beside the girl, lifting her in his arms. By the intermittent flashes of lightning he could see that she was even younger and prettier than he had at first thought. It was as though he were lifting a small child who was sleeping.

Then she stirred a moment and opened her eyes. She looked at him, startled, and tried to get out of his arms, but Reed held her fast.

"Now don't ask me where yuh are and what happened to yuh," he admonished. "Yuh happen to have been one of that Nick Burr gang raiding the Star shipping pens. Yuh're recovering from a fall from the horse I shot out from under yuh. I suppose that makes yuh a prisoner."

The girl said dazedly, "I remember now. It sounds like the fight is nearly over."

"It shore is," Reed answered grimly. "Yore gang outnumbered us about five to one. Honkytonk gal, ain't yuh? I suppose yuh belong to one of the men in the gang?" He set the girl down on her feet almost roughly.

She had an air of calmness about her that made Reed uncomfortable. There was self-reliance about the way she stood there in the darkness before him that gave him a feeling of distinct annoyance. He didn't like to have a woman affect him in that way at all. Even her voice was low and under control, although there was an undertone of emotion in it that he could not understand. She asked him:

"What makes you think I belong to one of the rustler gang?"

THE question made Reed angry. "Because yuh came with them, didn't yuh? And yuh hang out in the saloon that's supposed to be their headquarters. I guess yuh're Burr's gal, ain't yuh?"

As soon as he'd asked the question he regretted it. It sounded as though he were jealous of the rustler leader whom he'd never seen. And all because of a dance hall girl. He was thoroughly disgusted with himself and in a rage.

The girl answered him strangely. "It looks as though I don't belong to him any more. I seem to belong to you now; you said I was your prisoner."

Dave Reed felt a surge of bitterness sweep over him. That was the way with these women. They passed from one love to another as easily as they passed from the arms of one man to another on the dance floor. And that idea made him more angry with himself. Why should he care about what she did, or whose girl she was? But he knew that he did care, knew that he thought she was cheap, and the idea that he didn't like it upset him more. She was cheap. He would prove it to himself, and then he could forget all about her.

"Yuh're right," he said gruffly. "Yuh're my prisoner. Come here tuh me."

He took her arm and pulled her body up close to him. His arms went around her, and he kissed her roughly, brutally. But dammit, that picture of her pretty face as she lay there when the lightning flashed so vivdly, and now the feeling of her body yielding softly in his arms! This wasn't what he had expected. This wasn't making her seem cheap; it was making his heart pound heavily, making him want to hold her tighter to him in spite of himself.

When the girl withdrew her lips she whispered as though she were trying to solve a puzzle, "I—I didn't think it would be like that."

"What do yuh care?" he demanded angrily. "It's old stuff to yuh. Put yore arms around my neck and kiss me again." Dammit, he was going to cure this thing that was eating on him.

The girl hesitated, and he snapped out his demand again. Slowly, tentatively, she came to his arms, like one afraid, and he felt the throb of her heart against his own. It was sweet. And suddenly he knew that he was the captive of his own prisoner.

The girl's hands clung around his lean waist, her fingers clutching at him, her hands like branding irons where they seared him. He kissed her in one long and hungry kiss.

And then her hand jerked his gun out of his holster. Before he could release her, she swung the weapon and crashed it on his head in a stunning blow that knocked him senseless. Blinding flashes of lightning filled his skull, and he fell before he could even rip out a curse at her trickery.

Like a fleeing shadow, the girl was gone, and he lay unconscious in a puddle of rainwater, neither hearing the thunder nor seeing the lightning of the storm.

It was well after daylight when he regained his senses. Things were quiet along the bank of the river.

He looked about him. Finding his gun lying in the mud near where he had fallen, he picked it up and wiped it clean on his Levis, jammed it into his holster with a curse at the memory of the way he had been tricked.

He came out of the brush and looked toward the empty shipping pens. The cattle were gone. His horse was gone. And his head ached with the bump he had got and the thought of his having been outwitted by a dance hall girl. He cursed her every step of the long, muddy trudge back to the ranchhouse.

BOB RANKIN, the jovial ranch manager who had hired him less than twenty-four hours ago, had a worried look on his face. His boots and clothes were muddy. He showed signs of loss of sleep. He heard the story that Dave Reed told without interrupting him. The youth didn't mention that the rustler he had fought with, and who had stolen his horse, was a girl. It was disgrace enough for a rider to lose his horse under any circumstances.

When he had finished, Rankin said: "I'm sorry, but I guess there's nothing left around here for yuh to do. Yuh're the only buckaroo I sent out that wasn't killed. And there ain't any more need for guards. Here's a ten-dollar bill for wages. I hope yuh get work somewhere else. Good luck."

Reed borrowed one of the ranch horses and rode back to Bluewater, fifteen miles away. It was here that he had first seen the girl, and it was here, so Rankin had told him yesterday, that the rustlers hung out.

He had more than one purpose in going to town. The first was that he wanted his blue roan horse back. That horse was more like a brother to him than a riding animal. Besides that, it wasn't in his nature to let anybody get away with stealing his horse. Much less a rustler's girl! "Hell!" he said aloud, and knew that it wasn't just to get his horse back that he wanted to see the girl again. Pictures of her lying in the pool of rainwater when the big flash of lightning came, the feel of her in his arms, kept coming back to him to drive him crazy as he rode toward Bluewater.

The settlement wasn't much of a town, but it had a railroad spur with shipping pens, an assortment of adobe and board shacks that roasted in the sun, and a saloon and dance hall. The place where he had first seen the girl.

Reed pulled his Star Ranch horse up in front of the saloon late in the afternoon, ground hitched him, and went into the building. His eyes rapidly growing accustomed to the darkened interior after the bright sunlight, he approached the bar and ordered a drink. Lazily he looked around at the few other occupants of the place, his eyes questing eagerly.

At last he saw her, and the hand that held his glass trembled with rage at himself for having come back here. But trembled more, he admitted, because he was in a rage at her for sitting with other men.

At the table with the girl was a lean and weather-worn man with a long wrinkled neck like a turkey gobbler, and stringy black hair that fell down over his eyes. He had a scrubby black mustache to match. But the thing that gave him a particular evil appearance was the white cast over his left eye. It looked like the glazed eye of a dead fish, turned milky and malignant in the sun.

It may have been on account of the contrast, but the girl seemed even more pretty, even more out of place in this environment, than she had seemed out in the woods during the night battle. Reed felt the lure of her freshness, and was completely disgusted with himself.

"There's only one way to git 'er

outa my system," he told his drink, "and that's to find th' flaw in her. I can't hang around this neck of th' woods forever. So here goes."

He picked up his change from the bar, dropped a coin in the automatic phonograph, and headed toward the girl. She saw him coming, and her glass fell out of her hand, crashed on the floor. Arriving at her table, Reed ignored the man with the milky eye and asked her, "Dance with me, lady?"

SHE smiled back at him, half distrustfully. Then:

"Why not?" she answered.

He took her in his arms and they glided around the floor. When they were across the room from her table, she spoke to him without changing the position of her head—as though she didn't want the man at the table to realize that she was talking. "I'm sorry about last night. But I could not help it—"

"Maybe it was somebody else that stole my hoss and clouted me on the head. I think a lot of that animal—"

"He's in the livery stable. Thanks for the use of him. You don't know how badly I wanted to get away from there right then. I hope I didn't hurt you when I hit you?"

"Yuh did, but not the way yuh think," Reed answered gruffly. "Come over here to one of these booths. I've got to have a talk with yuh."

"But I can't. I'm with Mr. Burr."

"Burr? Is he yore sweetheart—that buzzard?"

The girl stiffened in his arms. "He's a friend of mine," she defended, but Reed got the idea that it cost her an effort to say it.

"He kin wait. I said I want to talk to yuh. Yuh're still my prisoner in a way; yuh stole my horse, and that's a serious offense in any county."

He stopped dancing, took her firmly by the arm and led her to a booth where he ordered drinks from the bartender with the solid-gold-plated front teeth.

"Now," he said when they were alone, "don't yuh think yuh owe me some kind of an explanation?"

The girl toyed with her glass of lemonade and glanced fearfully across the room toward where the man with the milky eye was glaring at the pair of them.

"I don't think there's anything I can say, other than that I'm sorry I had to do what I did last night. You'll have to be satisfied with that explanation, I'm afraid."

Despite the girl's evident wish not to be questioned, Reed suddenly said, "Listen here, I don't even know yore name. And the only thing I do know about yuh is that yuh're mixed up with a gang of tough hombres, that yuh're headed for real trouble if yuh don't look out. What's yore name, anyway?"

"You can call me Mary, that's enough."

"Well, my name's Dave, an' the last name's Reed. I'm not ashamed of it, an' I haven't got anything to hide. At least, I'm an honest cowpoke. Now see here, by all the rights in the world I shouldn't give yuh a second thought. Yuh've made a first class monkey out of me already, but I'm just fool enough to stick my neck out again. There's something all wrong about this business, and I've got a hunch that yuh are in some kind of trouble. Anyway, why don't yuh break down and tell me what's the game here? I might be able to help yuh."

"The girl looked at him queerly. "Why have you taken such a sudden interest in me? Is it just because you think I'm cheap and easy to get because I'm a honkytonk girl—as you called me last night?" There was a touch of bitterness in her voice.

"No, dammit!" Reed answered,

growling in his throat. "It musta been the lightning last night. There wasn't any moon. Maybe it was the way yuh kissed me."

A cold, harsh voice at Reed's elbow broke in. "So yuh like the way she kisses, do yuh? She oughta be good at it, she's been gittin' enough practice around here."

Reed saw the girl's face blanch as he whirled around. The man with the milky eye had come up unheard and was standing back of Reed, his legs spread out, his thumbs hooked into his belt. The two butts of his guns hung just below his fingertips. The man's cruel mouth was a thin line turning down at the corners, and in his rage the breath whistled through his nostrils.

Reed blew the smoke of his cigarette out through his nostrils and met the man's glare with a look of unconcern. "And what's that got to do with yuh, Blinkey?"

The man's jealous rage burst all bounds at the insult. He hopped around in front of Reed like an angry toad and jerked the red cloth off the table, upsetting the drinks. He was panting, and his sunburned face was black in the delirium of his wrath. "I'll show yuh hombres how yuh can fool around with my gal. Yuh can't make no fool out of me, you or her or Rankin, either. I'll fill the whole bunch o' yuh so full o' lead a mule couldn't drag yuh, yuh dirty thievin' grubline rider!"

REED saw that the man was insane with rage, and that there was no pacifying him. But Reed didn't want to soothe him, so he laughed at the man's contortions. Burr must have gone crazy at the smile on Reed's face, the flame of his wrath past endurance. He started clawing for his gun.

The man was fast, lightning fast. He had his right-hand weapon out almost before Reed knew what was coming. The girl screamed and fell back from the table. The man growled out an oath and dropped into a crouch as his gun came up.

But Reed sprang suddenly. He left his seat as though he were propelled by a steel spring, and as he came up his hands clutched the edge of the table, bringing it up with him. He heaved the table toward Burr just as the latter's gun roared. The echo of the shot reverberated through the saloon. Half a dozen bystanders dived for safety under the lone pool table in the place.

The table caught Burr full in front and the bullet from his weapon buried itself in a tableleg. But the table hadn't served its only purpose in being a shield for Reed. The momentum of it carried Burr over backward where he fell on his back on the floor. In trying to break his fall he dropped the gun out of his hand.

Reed was on his feet now, and he kicked the weapon spinning across the room. The others in the barroom were shouting warnings to each other, still trying to find places of safety. There were twice as many men trying to hide under the pool table as there was room, and the floor at that spot gave them no protection anyway.

Burr's left hand was half hidden under his prostrate body and, out of Reed's sight, he pulled the other weapon out of its holster and slid it along the floor in front of him.

Reed got a glimpse of it just as Burr lifted the barrel, and his booted foot flew out. He didn't start to kick. Instead, he stamped on the man's hand with his heel and ground the flesh and gunbarrel against the floor until Burr roared with the pain of it and released the weapon. Then Reed kicked it away.

And that was where he made a mistake. For Burr was at home in rough and tumble fighting, and as quick as lightning. While Reed's

foot was still off the floor when he kicked the gun, Burr grabbed his other ankle and jerked him off balance. Reed hit the floor floundering, and Burr was on him in a miracle of speed, mouthing curses and clawing at his eyes.

Reed was strong, but Burr seemed made of rawhide and muscle. The gang leader's talon fingers found Reed's throat and dug into his windpipe.

For minutes that seemed like hours, the puncher fought against the choking sensation that was rapidly overcoming him. His fists pummeled the head and body of the rustler with as little effect as though he were pounding a log of wood.

Just as he felt the last of his strength ebbing from him, he was lucky enough to get a hold on Burr's own throat with his two hands, and he sank his thumbs into the man's windpipe, holding them there until the rustler began gasping for breath and easing up on his own grip.

THE fight had lasted for what seemed hours to Reed. In their struggles they had covered the entire cleared space of the barroom. Now they were on the floor locked in each other's arms halfway across the room from where they had started.

His eyes blinded with sweat and blood and the hair that fell over his eyes, Reed was nonetheless conscious that an ominous lack of movement had suddenly come over Burr. His suspicions were aroused immediately and he suspected some trick. He wiped the muck from his eyes with his shirt sleeve, suddenly sucked in his breath at what he saw.

Burr's hand had accidentally come into contact with the weapon Reed had formerly kicked out of his reach. The gun was lodged back of a pile of stovewood beside the pot-bellied stove. Burr's hand was already clutching the gun.

As Reed discovered this fact, Burr gave one jerk. The little pile of wood tumbled down, and Burr had the gun free. He swung it around at Reed even as they lay together.

Reed caught the rustler's wrist just before the gun exploded, thus deflecting the bullet that otherwise could hardly have missed him. The burning powder scorched his face and buried itself under his skin. The roar of the weapon blasted his eardrums until the ensuing silence were as though he were stone deaf. The bullet grazed his temple, slashed a crease across his skull above his ear.

Reed's senses left him and he slumped like a drunken man.

But there was a thin thread of self preservation that held, and he clung to the gun hand of the man, instinct alone making him realize that to let go meant sudden death. The cold conviction grew on Reed that this was the deciding struggle, that one of them would die. The rustler redoubled his efforts to get the gun barrel pointed at his antagonist. And Reed's strength was almost gone.

The puncher resigned himself to death. He had fought hard, but he could fight no longer. He gripped the gun barrel with his last final effort and jerked convulsively. He heard the gun roar, felt the heat of the barrel and the exploding shell, as things went dark for him.

He was surprised later to find men dashing water into his face, while one of them poured whiskey down his throat.

"That was some fight, hombre," somebody said.

Reed looked around, puzzled. He tried to get up off the floor where he lay, and found that every bone in his body seemed broken or twisted. His muscles were living

agony, his head weighed a ton. He wiped blood and sweat out of his eyes with his shirt sleeve, then finally managed to get to his feet. He looked around. The rustler, Burr, was stretched out cold on the floor. Somebody had thrown a red tablecloth over his body.

"That was the prettiest trick I ever seen," the bartender said. "Yuh twisted that gun barrel around just as he triggered. The bullet got him clean between the eyes. Imagine a hombre killin' hisself in a fight. What'll yuh have, stranger?"

REED took a big hooker of whiskey straight, then got some water and washed up. It was dark outside now, and newcomers were drifting in. Reed wanted to get away.

The bartender had not seemed unfriendly to him, so he called the man down to the end of the bar and asked him, "That girl I was drinking in that booth with—where'd she go?"

"Yuh got me," the bartender answered. "She comes and goes like a hant. Nobody knows nothin' about her. She just disappeared like a hant when the ruckus started."

"Who is she?" Reed persisted. "What's she 'sposed to do around here?"

"You know as much as I do, brother. She comes in here and sings for tips and drinks once in a while. Just dropped in for the first time about a month ago. We don't pay her no salary, so we don't try to tell her what to do. Folks likes to hear her sing, and some, like yuh and Rankin and Burr there, seems to like more'n her voice. But I reckon yuh cut down the competition somewhat."

Suddenly Reed's mind whirled with an idea. "Thanks," he said. "I'll see yuh some more."

In the big comfortable living room of the Star Ranch, Bob Rankin, the fat, genial manager, was standing in front of the empty fireplace. The girl, Mary, was seated on the sofa, still clad in the dress of flaming red silk that she wore as an entertainer at the saloon..

Rankin was saying teasingly, "So yuh've finally decided that yuh like me better than yuh do that rustler, Burr, have yuh?"

"I didn't say that. I said I liked you a little more than I used to. I still like Burr. A girl can like two different people for different reasons."

Rankin smiled and shook his head. "Not with me. I wouldn't want to share my affections with an ornery rustler."

"Well," the girl said, "that seems to settle it. I couldn't work at that place and refuse to see him. And I can do better for myself staying there. You're just an exalted cowhand, anyway. That's all a ranch manager is. Burr could buy you out a dozen times over."

The smile left Rankin's face. "Is that so?" he shouted. "Well, here's some news for yuh. I own that hombre, body and soul. He don't make a dime that I don't tell him to."

The girl laughed with cold scorn. "I don't believe you. I admit that Burr's a rustler, but what are you? If you were so smart you'd own your own place, instead of working—"

"Don't fool yourself, filly," Rankin said angrily. "I'll own this place in another year, myself. I'm a lot smarter than yuh or Burr think I am. I'll buy out the Star outfit for a song, and use their money to do it with, and have money left over. Who do yuh think is gettin' the *dinero* for all these missin' cattle? Yuh think I'm bein' stole blind, do yuh? Well, if yuh want to sell your kisses to the smartest crook—have a look at me. I'm the brains of the Burr gang. Burr's just my hired hand."

The girl got to her feet. "That's all I've been wanting to know for a

long time," she said evenly. "And now you can pack up your stuff and get off this place. You're through with the Star Cattle Company, but you're not through with the law yet."

Rankin's brows lowered and his face went red with perplexed rage. "What th' hell are yuh talking about?" he demanded.

"I'm trying to tell you that *I'm the Star Cattle Company,*" the girl answered. "It belongs to me. All those reports that you sent me to my home in Concho looked suspicious. Other people weren't losing cattle in this part of the country. So I came up to investigate, and I started on the outside, instead of letting you know I was here. Here's a letter that identifies me, in case you're interested." She handed him a letter that had been folded in her pocketbook.

Rankin read the paper twice over, taking a long time to think. When he looked at the girl again, there was nothing but the rage of a trapped man on his face. He said coldly, "Do yuh think I'm going to let yuh make trouble for me? No, girl, I've gone too far in this thing now. That means yuh've got to be taken care of—either sold off down in Mexico—or something. That is, when I get through with yuh myself. *Come here!*" He barked the last order as though the words were shot out of a gun.

His pudgy hands caught the girl by the shoulders and lifted her shrinking form from the couch. He held her up and looked squarely into her frightened eyes.

"Pretty smart, wasn't yuh?" he taunted her. "Well, we'll let yuh see whether yuh still prefer that rustler's lovemaking to mine."

A new voice came into the room, sharp as a razor.

"Not yet, Rankin. Take yore hands off her!"

Dave Reed propelled himself into the room through a window, and stood before the pair, his gun held loosely in his hand.

Rankin whirled, placing the girl's body between him and his ex-rider. His eyes were small and sunk in the fat of his face, shining like the beady eyes of a hog.

"Get out of here, hombre," he snarled warningly. "Yuh can't shoot without hitting her. Get out, or I'll kill her myself!"

One of Rankin's hands dropped to his hip pocket and came out with a small pistol. He had Reed checked, and unable to shoot without risking the life of the girl. And he took full advantage of his position. He raised the gun and rested it over the girl's shoulder, aimed toward Reed.

"Move," he barked.

Reed dared not shoot, for Rankin could get the girl with a bullet before he could do anything about it. He hesitated a moment, balked in his effort to free the girl.

The girl had been still for a moment. She saw Rankin slowly raising his pistol with his free hand while he held her with the other. The gun was traveling in an arc toward Reed.

SUDDENLY she jerked. Both her hands clutched at Rankin's wrist, and she relaxed all her weight, dragging the wrist down. Rankin's gun exploded into the floor.

It echoed to the roar of another gun. Reed found six inches of Rankin's head clear and exposed above the girl's own head. He fired once—but with slow care.

A round black hole appeared suddenly in Rankin's face just over his eye. He let the girl slip from his dead arm, and sank to the floor. A little trickle of blood seeped onto the white hair of the goatskin rug on which he fell, and the ruby drops looked purple in the lamplight. But nobody observed this decoration.

Reed had the girl in his arms, and

*(Concluded on page 135)*

# Death Rides

*Smoke Sloan had*

## A Complete Novelette

## By ROBERT

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### CHAPTER I

### *Hootowl Hangout*

SMOKE SLOAN sent his gotch-eared dun to the big mesquite, leaned easily and gazed at the reward poster. A mocking light flared briefly in his smoky grey eyes, and flicking across his dark face, a sardonic smile made the knife-edged scar on one high cheekbone squirm as if it were alive.

The face Smoke Sloan saw in the poster was that of a smiling, boyish-looking young fellow. There was something about him, the high-

## Smoke Sloan Savvies One Kind of Revenge

# the Rio Bravo

*shoved inside*

## of Owlhoot Vengeance

## E. OBETS

*"Lone Ranger Roundup," etc.*

bridged nose or the proud set to the thin lips, which gave him an arrogant look, as if he felt he had the world by the tail on a downhill pull.

That same expression, though etched in deeper lines, was on the face of Smoke Sloan as he smiled now.

These five long years, through the *bosques* of the Bravo, Smoke Sloan had followed a dangerous trail—a trail called Gunpowder which made its lonesome, crooked way to a place known as Death. Bitterness, Smoke Sloan had known, and heartache and hunger. But ever blazing fiercely in

## —Even When it Means Outlawin' Love!

the seething furnace of his mind, making all things endurable, was the bright red promise of revenge.

Some day, Smoke Sloan had promised himself, he would find the one who had framed him, who had branded an innocent young ranchman a thief and a murderer; some day, Smoke Sloan would find Lane Vickers.

WITH a strange, mirthless smile on his hawklike face, Smoke Sloan leaned close to the young man who smiled back at him from the reward poster.

"Yuh usta be Smoke Sloan," he said softly. "Yuh usta have an eye for pretty gals, and yuh usta like to dance with 'em, and now and then heft a drink or two. Yuh usta have plenty o' friends to dance and drink with jest like ever'body else has. But yuh're dead now, young Smoke Sloan, and in a few more days the hombre that killed yuh will be dead too." He reached out a slender hand and ripped the reward poster from the tree.

Face set like grim, weather-stained granite, the slim rider headed the dun on toward Helote. It was from this hell-roaring little trail town, five years ago, that Smoke Sloan had fled for his life. A lawman's bullet or a hangman's noose still awaited him in Helote, but he urged the tired dun onward.

A red evening sun was poking long fingers over the flat adobes when the dun clumped down Helote's only street and stopped at the jail. With a dozen hard-eyed loafers in front of the nearby saloon eying him curiously, the slim rider swung down and stepped boldly through the door.

Three men were in the office of the jail. Smoke Sloan knew them all. There was paunchy, red-jowled Hale Bradley, Parson Lowe's puppet sheriff. And sitting on the sheriff's desk, head bald as a turkey egg, was Goose Turner. The dark, handsome ranny with the spiked mustache, lounging beside the Goose, was Spik Madrid, which name Spik always made you pronounce Madrid, "Madreed." Of the three, Spik was the dangerous one.

Both he and the Goose had been working for the Chino Land and Cattle Company when Lane Vickers, foreman and chief gun-tosser for the salty spread, had made his play against young Smoke Sloan. They had still been packing Chino guns when Lane Vickers had killed Bat McQueen, one of his two bosses, and himself had gone on the owl-hoot.

But even though Lane Vickers and his lightning-swift Colts had left Helote, Smoke Sloan knew he was taking long chances coming here. Goose Turner and Spik Madrid were plenty fast themselves—and there was a five-thousand reward on Smoke Sloan's head.

Spik Madrid started rolling a quirly, saw the slim figure in the doorway and let paper and tobacco drift to the floor.

"Smoke Sloan!" he breathed. In one flowing movement his hand swept toward his hip.

Mockingly, the outlaw said, "Don't do it, Spik," and the hands which had been hanging at his sides suddenly were filled with six-guns.

The other two, Sheriff Hale Bradley and Goose Turner, let their hands slap their sides and glared at Smoke Sloan.

"It is the damn skunk," growled the fat sheriff. "I never woulda knowed him, though, if Spik hadn't called his name. By damn it, Sloan, yuh better give yoreself up. Yuh'll play it even leavin' this burg alive!"

Ignoring the sheriff, Smoke Sloan turned his slitted eyes on Spik Madrid. "I got jest one word for you three *pelados,*" he bit out. "Tell yore sheep-eatin' boss, Parson Lowe, he kin find Lane Vickers ranchin'

some ten miles across from Roma."

"Thanks," Spik Madrid murmured, black eyes on the door. "That'll be another five thousand I'll put with the bounty on yore carcass."

"What's the matter, Sloan?" sneered Goose Turner. "Lose yore nerve along with yore reppitation? I thought yuh hated Vickers' guts."

Smiling his mirthless smile, Smoke Sloan stepped backward. Immersed in his thoughts, he failed to notice the gleam in Spik Madrid's eyes.

He wasn't telling these *paisanos* his plans. Smoke was thinking. If they knew he was hitting straight for Roma, for Lane Vickers, they might manage to beat him there. He wanted first whack at Vickers, and he was going to take it. But there was always the chance those snake-fast Colts of Vickers would cut him down. This way, though, even if Vickers did prove the faster, Smoke Sloan was certain of his revenge. Parson Lowe and his gunhawks would kill Vickers, for certain.

That was the only reason Smoke Sloan had ridden into Parson Lowe's stronghold. He was determined, no matter what happened, to make certain Lane Vickers would die.

"Damn him, he'll wish—" Smoke Sloan's boots froze to the floor.

"In case yuh don't know it," a hollow voice said, "this here's a .45 pokin' in yore back, and she's itchin' fer fresh meat! Drop them smoke-poles and turn around—slow!"

Parson Lowe! Smoke Sloan would know that shivery voice anywhere. It had always reminded him of clods hitting a coffin lid, while Parson Lowe, himself, with his sunken white cheeks, his gaunt frame and the black suit he habitually wore, had always made Smoke think of a person dressed to represent Death.

Maybe the Parson was Death, but Smoke Sloan intended to find out. For death was the only thing that could keep him from meeting Lane Vickers, now.

Slowly, retaining his grasp on his Colt handles, Smoke Sloan lowered his arms. He saw the three facing him—the fat sheriff, Goose Turner and Spik Madrid—all grinning like wolves, flash out their six-guns.

"I reckon yuh win, Parson," Smoke Sloan said—and whirled sideways, right arm whipping around to encircle the Parson's back.

It was a desperate thing to do, but its very unexpectedness won him a respite. For Parson Lowe had never thought that a man with a .45 jabbed into his back and three more leering from the front would offer any resistance. When the Parson discovered his error, it was almost too late.

AS Smoke Sloan spun around, the Parson's .45 roared. Smoke felt a slug crease his side, then he had hooked his right arm around Parson Lowe, and his own gun was yammering. Spik Madrid cursed, let his weapon bump the floor and clapped hand to his shoulder. Sheriff Hale Bradley and the Goose dropped their guns as if they had suddenly become red hot, and reached ceilingward.

For, as Smoke Sloan, holding the Parson in front of him, backed to the door, there was no mistaking the light in those smoky grey eyes.

Smoke knew, though, that he wasn't out of Helote, not by a long shot!

He grabbed the Parson's gun, gave him a shove and made the distance to his horse in one great leap. As he flung himself into the saddle, he saw the saloon loafers, six-guns flashing in the sunlight, surging toward him. He saw Parson Lowe, his three henchmen right behind him, boil from the jail door.

Two short bursts from Smoke Sloan's Colts brought the saloon loafers up short, sent the Parson and his men scampering back inside the jail. Triumphant smile flicking across his dark face, Smoke fed the

dun steel. The dun might be a little tired, but he could still travel!

The dun spun around and lined out south. A single shot sounded from the jail door, and the dun screamed, stumbled and went down. Smoke Sloan hurtled over the dun's head, hit running. There was nothing else he could do; both Colts were empty.

As he ducked between two buildings, he caught a glimpse of Spik Madrid, .45 smoking in his hand, running from the jail; he saw the pack from the saloon coming in full cry.

Hammering on between the buildings, Smoke Sloan came out on an open space. A long stone's throw ahead he saw a string of box cars. With slugs whining past his ears, kicking up dust at his heels, he ran toward them. As he ran he reloaded and cursed. Damn 'em, somebody would pay for that horse!

LEAPING across the main-line tracks, he gained the cover of the box cars. A vicious tattoo from his Colts made his enemies dig in their heels. One man pitched onto his face, while another howled and commenced limping.

"Spik — Goose!" came Parson Lowe's enraged yell. "Circle and git behind the salty son! We'll keep him busy in front!"

Goose Turner and Spik Madrid swung in a wide circle, keeping just outside Smoke's gun range. It wouldn't be long now, Smoke thought. He couldn't watch front and back at the same time, not and keep his guns powder fed.

He heard a long-drawn, mournful whistle, and knew the Border Flyer was coming in. Then slugs were banging against the iron box car wheels, splattering on the rails. While Spik Madrid and the Goose moved warily up the siding, Parson Lowe and the others were keeping up a steady barrage from the front. Unless something happened pronto, the battle would be over.

The Border Flyer came roaring in, stopped with a hissing of air brakes. For a minute Spik Madrid and his partner were cut off from the others. Smoke Sloan emptied his Colts at the gun-slinging pair, then started running up the siding, away from them. With triumphant yells, the two gave chase.

On the other side of the box cars he heard the Border Flyer pulling out. Rounding the last car, he saw the long black coaches of the Flyer, rapidly gaining speed, sliding past. He could see passengers, mouths hanging open, peering from the coach windows.

The last coach flashed past Smoke Sloan just as Spik Madrid and the Goose cut loose another volley from hungry guns. Smoke Sloan paid them no heed. Smoke Sloan was legging up the track, hard after the Border Flyer.

"He's goin' to git away!" Parson Lowe yelled insanely. "He's goin' to catch the train!"

On the rear platform of the last coach Smoke Sloan saw a man dressed in range clothes, and beside him a slim-bodied girl. He could hear slugs hammering the ironwork of the platform, could see them splintering the wood behind the girl. Parson Lowe and his killers were making one last frenzied effort to down their five-thousand-dollar quarry.

The man ducked inside the coach. But the girl never moved. A strained look on her face, she called:

"Come on, cowboy, you're losing ground!"

Weak from his side wound, weary from so much unaccustomed running, Smoke Sloan gave a desperate lunge. His fingers clawed at the iron railing, commenced slipping, and he knew his luck had failed. Then strong, slim fingers clamped his wrists, pulled forward. His own fingers curled around the railing, and with the girl's arms around him,

still helping him, he hauled himself onto the platform.

The mirthless smile on his hawkish face, he spun around, Colts magically appearing in his fists. But Parson Lowe and his wolf pack, six-guns sagging in disappointment, were a hundred yards down the track.

"Damn yuh, there'll be another time," Smoke Sloan said softly. "If my guns kin shade Lane Vickers'."

## CHAPTER II

### *Life for a Life*

THE girl had honey gold hair that reminded Smoke Sloan of catclaw blooms in the springtime, and her eyes were clear blue and wide-set. But it was the red, full-lipped mouth which made her seem so eager, so brimming with life.

And her quick, easy movements—whom did she remind him of?

A friendly smile on her soft lips, she said, "Those men back there, they sure wanted your scalp, cowboy."

Smoke Sloan remembered then that a girl like this could mean nothing to him. He was an outlaw, feared and despised. The old familiar hatred flared in his brain, and he knew that the only thing that mattered to him now was to face Lane Vickers over death-splitting Colts.

He turned smoky grey eyes on the girl. "It wasn't my scalp them sons wanted," he said harshly. "It was the five thousand that goes with it."

Lips curling, he watched her smile fade, then pushed past her and went inside the coach.

"Wait! You're wounded!" she called.

But Smoke Sloan never stopped. With people staring at him as if he were some jungle beast, he stalked on down the aisle. He had already forgotten the girl. He was thinking that Parson Lowe and his pack wouldn't waste time. They'd hit Roma on the next train.

"By that time," he promised grimly, "my little chore with Lane Vickers will be finished, one way or the other."

It was dawn when the Border Flyer made its brief pause at Roma. As he stepped to the ground, Smoke Sloan noticed three wary-eyed men lounging near the station platform. He knew the one with the mottled, pock-marked face. That worthy was a two-bit badman called Brock Dell. Not so long past, at a certain rancho deep in the chaparro, Smoke had taken the pleasure of pistol whipping the *cabron* for forcing his attentions on a dark-skinned señorita. Smoke could still see the scars of that encounter on the plug-ugly's face.

As the Border Flyer pulled away from the station, the three men started toward Smoke Sloan. He hooked thumbs in his gunbelt and waited. Then someone came from behind him and stopped at his elbow. Without taking his eyes off the advancing trio, he knew it was the girl.

Brock Dell's tiny black eyes shifted away from Smoke Sloan. "Miss—uh—Miss Kay?" he questioned.

The girl moved a step nearer Smoke Sloan. "Yes," she said. "What is it? Where is my brother?"

"He sent us to meet yuh," Brock Dell answered smoothly. "He happened to a little accident. Hoss fell with him."

"How bad is he hurt?" she asked quietly. And at Brock Dell's ready answer, she gave a relieved sigh and said, "Take me to him—right away!"

Smoke Sloan took two steps away from the girl, then turned and said, If yuh don't know these jiggers, Miss, I shore wouldn't trust 'em."

The girl's chin came up. "Can I trust you, a stranger?" Her blue

eyes were steady on his face. "My brother sent these men, so I know *they're* all right."

Smoke Sloan's swift anger flared. "Even an outlaw kin have a spark of decency," he said harshly. "You was my sister, I'd crawl to meet yuh before I'd send a woman-lovin' skunk like Brock Dell for yuh!"

"Why, yuh damn—"

Brock Dell's words died in his throat at the threat in those mocking eyes. A contemptuous droop to his thin lips, Smoke Sloan turned his back on the tinhorn and walked away.

Twenty minutes later, astride a leggy but windbroke sorrel from the livery stable, Smoke Sloan was loping down the river trail. Just ten more miles! His blood beat savagely in his veins. Just ten more miles! and his six-guns would be singing their song of death!

He rounded a pear flat, wound through a jungle of scrub mesquite and black-brush. Riding toward him, Captain Bill Howell, erect, square-jawed, in the lead, came a dozen Rangers!

SWIFT wheeled the sorrel, sent him zigzagging through the chaparral. He heard a voice yell, "It's Smoke Sloan! Don't let the killin' skunk git across the river!" And horses were crashing after him, bullets snapping past. Before Smoke found a narrow *sendero* which led riverward, the windbroke sorrel was staggering.

"If nothin' else," Smoke Sloan gritted, "Lane Vickers orter die for all the horses he's caused me to kill!"

Almost dead on his feat, the windbroke sorrel still was traveling like a bullet when the *sendero* suddenly ended at the sheer twenty-feet-high bank of the Rio. Both horse and rider sailed into space. Smoke Sloan saw muddy brown water rushing up to meet them. As he kicked free from the stirrups, the bitter thought came to him that this was just another thing Lane Vickers would pay for.

There was a flat, smacking sound when the sorrel's belly slapped water, then Smoke was fighting the sluggish undertow. Bullets were spatting around him. On the bank above him, men were yelling, cursing. Smoke sucked in a deep breath, and let his heavy boots and guns drag him under. When he came up the current had swept him around a bend and to safety. But the sorrel was not in sight.

On the Mexico side, Smoke Sloan made his way up-river. Back in the chaparro a way, one, Pancho Chavez, ran what he called a *posada,* even though all his patrons ran toward tied-down six-guns, hard-bitten faces and evil eyes. And fat Pancho always kept plenty of spare horses and guns, with ammunition and whiskey on the side.

His heels blistered, soaked to the skin, Smoke Sloan was sullen as a sore-headed bear when he strode into the barroom of fat Pancho's outlaw refuge. Pancho was serving mescal to a couple of hard-case customers. An uneasy smile on his greasy face, he waddled down the bar and looked inquiringly at the new arrival.

"I want a horse and a box o' .45's," Smoke Sloan growled. "Pronto!"

"I was worry eet ees a room the Señor Sloan would have," Pancho wheezed. "My poor rooms she ees all feel op."

He popped underneath the bar and came up with an unbroken box of cartridges. Whistling up a boy, he sent him for a horse.

Smoke Sloan laid one Colt on the bar, while he punched wet loads from the other. "So she is all fill up," he thought, noticing the two stubble-bearded customers eying him. "Yeah, and something shore is stirrin' around here."

Smoke Sloan had no time to waste

finding out what it was, though. When the Mex boy came leading a jug-headed pinto to the door, Smoke gave the sorry animal a sour look and swung into the saddle. Anything with four legs ought to carry him ten miles. After that, nothing would matter.

Smoke rode around the *posada* and found a trail leading through the fringe of mesquite. Impatience possessed him, eagerness to have it over with. Then, as he turned the pinto into the trail, he heard a faint scream. Turning around in the saddle, he noticed four horses standing heads down at the far corner of the *posada*.

SMOKE SLOAN recognized those mounts. He had seen them at the railroad station in Roma. He knew they must belong to Brock Dell and his salty companions, and the girl must have ridden the fourth one. It must have been the girl who screamed.

Shrugging, Smoke Sloan touched spurs to the pinto. Hell, it wasn't his party. Anyhow, he'd warned her, hadn't he? And now he was heading for that showdown with Lane Vickers! There'd been too much delay, already!

But Smoke kept remembering the girl's friendly smile, and the night he'd whipped Brock Dell away from the Mex girl.

"Damn it all," he growled. "She saved my skin. Anyhow, I got plenty time to settle with Vickers."

He left the pinto at the edge of the mesquite and went on tiptoe to the back door. Easing open the door and slipping inside, he found himself in a hall faced by several doors, all shut now. Behind the second door on his right, he heard voices.

"My brother will kill you for this!" he heard the girl say, her voice low, choky.

In his smooth tone, Brock Dell answered, "Yep, yore brother'll come on the run, baby, when he gits our word yuh've been hurt. He'll come a-runnin' so fast he won't think of no trap till it's too late. Till he hits Skull Pass. Why, me and the boys'll make buzzard bait out of him! Five-thousand-dollars worth of buzzard bait!"

Beyond the door at the hall's far end, voices were murmuring. Smoke wondered how long it would take those two mescal-guzzlers to get back here. But it never entered his head that his chance of taking the girl from these yellow-bellies was something less than one in ten.

"That's what I call a good joke," a third voice, harsh as a buzz saw ripping a pine knot, beat through the door. "That fool actually thought he could trust yuh, Brock, jest 'cause he saved yore bacon onct! Haw! Haw! Sendin' Brock Dell for his sister!"

"I did go fer her, in a big way!" Brock Dell laughed. "So be nice, sweetie, and give old Brock a little kiss."

Smoke Sloan heard a strangled sob. Cursing under his breath, he rapped on the door. "Señor Dell," he called in soft Spanish, "could you but come to the door one minute? It is Pancho, Pancho Chavez."

He heard Brock Dell swear, heard boots scrape the floor. "I jest hope the woman-lovin' son gives me the excuse," he told himself, and both blued Colts appeared in his hands.

The door swung inward. Before Brock Dell even had time to grunt, Smoke Sloan had shoved inside and the blued Colts were bogged in Dell's soft belly. Glancing over Dell's shoulder, Smoke saw the girl, lashed to a chair, watching him out of enormous blue eyes! saw Dell's two *compadres* going for their six-guns.

"Unh-uh," Smoke said gently. "One miscue outa you bold *caballeros*, and Friend Dell gits it in the guts. Untie

that lady—jump, yuh mangy sons!" A Colt muzzle jabbed harder into Brock Dell's middle.

"Don't—don't try nothin', fellers!" Brock Dell quavered.

But evidently Brock Dell's buddies were not much worried about him—or else they didn't know Smoke Sloan. While the skinny, weasel-faced ranny leaped to get behind the girl, the squat, apish one stabbed desperately for his .45. Neither of them ever made another move of his own choosing.

Smoke Sloan's right-side Colt swept around Brock Dell and roared twice in rapid succession. "Figured yuh wouldn't worry much about somebody else's hide," Smoke mocked. But it is doubtful if either outlaw heard him. After a convulsive kick in mid-air, the weasel-faced one was lying still in the corner. The apish gent had staggered back into a chair, and was sitting there calmly. He looked almost comical—except for the round hole in his forehead.

"Yuh damn cowardly skunks," Smoke rasped, and his left-hand Colt hit Brock Dell's head with a sickening *plop*. "Mebbe yuh'll jump another woman!"

Whipping out a pocketknife, Smoke cut the girl free from the chair. Up front, he heard excited shouts. As he hustled the girl into the hall, men came bursting through the far-end door.

"He's got the gal!" one yelled. "Pour it to 'em!"

But Smoke Sloan was already slamming the back door. Just as slugs splintered its panels, he swooped up the girl in his arms and leaped toward the four horses. He threw the girl onto one of them, flung himself on another, and then the animals were pounding away from there.

A short distance up the southward trail, Smoke Sloan reined into the mesquite and pulled his mount down to a walk. In a minute or so he heard horses hammering on the trail he had just left. The mirthless smile on his lips, he turned to his companion.

"Now we're even," he told her. "You saved my hide and I saved yores."

"But we're not!" she declared. Her eyes were starry when she looked at him, her lips tremulous. "Anyone would have done what I did. But you—you risked your life for me. I—I'll never forget you!"

To hide his embarrassment, Smoke said, "I never quite savvied that deal. If yore brother ain't wounded, why didn't he meet you himself? Besides, why'd them *paisanos* want to kill him so bad?"

"He's the best brother in the world," she said staunchly. "He'll have some good reason, too, for not meeting me—why, I haven't seen him in three years! Lane's his name," she added proudly, "Lane Vickers."

## CHAPTER III

### *When Outlaws Meet*

IT was high noon when Smoke Sloan and the girl rode up to the little three-roomed adobe squatted there in the mesquite. Dully, Smoke realized this was the day he had dreamed of for five whole years. In a few minutes more Colts would be booming; and an overdue debt would be paid up in blood. But, somehow, as Smoke looked at Kay Vickers' eager face, he felt no elation.

"Oh, I hope he's here!" she said; and she reminded Smoke of a little child on Christmas Eve. "I know you'll like him; I'm sure he'll like you, too."

She glanced at Smoke, and there was something in her eyes that made him turn away from her. "You're not going to just ride off, you know.

You're going to visit with us, a long visit, if you will."

Smoke Sloan couldn't meet her eyes. Only one thing could happen, he was thinking, when he and Lane Vickers met. And this girl, face drawn with horror, was doomed to be a witness. Once more Death would ride the *bosques* of the old Rio Bravo, and with a single careless gesture would change this girl's life, now so brave and beautiful, into a bitter, twisted husk.

Looking back over those terrible years of his own life, Smoke Sloan knew that this was true. Still, as they dismounted, the old hatred flamed anew in his brain, and he realized that nothing could change him. As vividly as if it had happened only yesterday, once more that fateful scene in the Drover's Rest came flooding into his mind.

ONCE again, in memory, young Smoke Sloan stood with his friends at the bar and washed down the dust of a month's heartbreaking toil. Young Smoke Sloan had been laughing when Lane Vickers and Gunner Fane came striding in. Lane Vickers, so sure of his name and fame, foreman and ace gunslick for a salty crew; and Gunner Fane, his *segundo,* second in speed of gun-hand only to Lane Vickers, himself.

Sudden quiet had come to the saloon. Then Lane Vickers' flat, toneless voice had said, "It's trail's end, Sloan. Yuh've stole yore last cow from the Chino, marked yore last sleeper. We found that box canyon today, Sloan, and we got the goods on yuh. But the law ain't handlin' this; the law's too slow. From now on, every long-looper in the country will know jest how quick death'll strike him if he fools with the Chino. Drag iron, yuh damn cow thief!"

Then the heavy clamor of Colts, and Gunner Fane pitching onto his face in the sawdust—dead. And young Smoke Sloan, lips curled back from his teeth, blued .45s smoking in his hands, backing to the door. Lane Vickers, so sure Gunner Fane could care for this young waddy that his own deadly weapons remained leathered, saying, "Now, it's murder, Sloan!"

It hadn't been murder; young Smoke Sloan, odds heavy against him, had fought a fair and square fight. But Lane Vickers, with Chino money and Chino influence backing him, had made the murder charge stick. A year later, the whispering of the leaves had brought Smoke Sloan word that Lane Vickers had killed one of his bosses, Bat McQueen, and that Parson Lowe had sworn to tack Vickers' scalp over the Chino ranchhouse door.

The news had not cooled the flame of Smoke Sloan's hatred. Now, he had thought, they would meet on even terms, one outlaw against another. Thin lips curved in that mirthless smile, he had practised his draw till it became smooth and swift as a flick of light.

He knew now, as he followed the girl inside the adobe, that he was ready. When he faced Lane Vickers, it would be six-gun showdown between the two fastest gunhawks who ever rode the Rio. And no matter which of them proved the faster, Smoke Sloan, in the end, would come out winner. Parson Lowe and his killers would take up where Smoke left off.

Kay Vickers' soft voice pulled Smoke Sloan from his dark thoughts. "He's not here," she was saying, the words dull with a worry she tried to conceal.

"He'll be here in plenty time," Smoke Sloan said harshly. And at her quick, almost frightened glance, he added, "Yore brother's prob'ly out lookin' for yuh."

Brightening, she exclaimed, "You must be starved! Here, make yourself useful. Take this bucket and

fill it, while I stir up something."

She was smiling at him now, but Smoke Sloan couldn't smile back.

So immersed in his thoughts that he forgot his habitual caution, he slogged down to the creek which wound through a cool grove of cottonwoods perhaps a hundred yards from the house. He was wondering if he could ride down the trail and meet Lane Vickers. It would be hard enough on the girl, afterward, without her actually having to see the killing.

Smoke straightened with the dripping bucket full of water. Too late he heard the rope whistle. He dropped the bucket, but the loop was already settling over his head. It pinned his arms to his sides, jerked him sprawling.

FLAT on the ground, struggling against the biting rope, he saw Brock Dell and another, one of the mescal drinkers from the *posada,* come running from the cottonwoods. Grinning evilly, Brock Dell slammed his six-gun butt against Smoke's head.

Sharp pain in his wrists brought Smoke Sloan to. In a few minutes, after his head had cleared, he found that a rope running from his wrists to a stout limb over his head had him pulled up till his toes just touched the ground. He was helpless. Brock Dell, both mescal topers with him now, was leering at him.

All the fires of hell glowing in his tiny black eyes, Brock Dell snarled, "Yuh cut me up onct with a pistol barrel, Sloan. And today yuh beat me outa the five thousand I aimed to git fer rubbin' out Lane Vickers. Yuh pistol whupped me agin, too. But I'll git me a five thousand, Sloan, when I take what's left o' you across the Rio, and mebbeso I'll rub out Vickers, anyhow. Ten thousand at one lick wouldn't be bad a-tall!

"And, Sloan, the purty part is, I kin collect on you dead or alive. I'm goin' to work on yuh plenty afore I do any killin, 'though, yuh damn longnosed son!"

Mouth a thin gash in his dark face, Smoke Sloan said not a word, just looked at Brock Dell out of those smoky eyes. And when Dell suddenly slashed a gun barrel into his face, he still kept that mocking silence.

Brock Dell went crazy. "Don't look at me like that!" he screeched, and raised the dripping six-gun. "Damn yuh, Sloan! Afore I'm through, yuh'll whine fer mercy like a whupped *pelon!*"

Smoke Sloan, knowing his string was about played out, said, "Yuh better do a good job of it."

Rage almost choked the tinhorn. "I'll do a good job," he mouthed. "Afore I kill yuh, I'll pistol whup yore face into mush!" Viciously, the heavy six-gun chopped down; hit with a *thock,* and swung up for a second blow.

"I wouldn't," a soft voice purred, and from the cottonwoods paced a man catlike in his movements. He was lean, somber-faced, and with his mild blue eyes, fair skin and bright golden hair, he was girlish in appearance; slim hands hung at his sides, well away from thonged-down Colts. Yet for all of that, there was about him the quiet threat of sudden death.

Brock Dell failed to notice that ominous quietness. Brock Dell's evil eyes were upon those thonged-down Colts—so many precious inches from those slim hands.

"Lane Vickers!" Brock Dell belched, and the gun in his hand whipped down, hammer jerking back for the kill.

Smoke Sloan was probably the only man present who really saw what next happened. Like the flick of a flame, a slim hand blurred down and up. Colt sound beat on the still air. A dark stream pumping from

the left-side pocket of his leather vest, Brock Dell slowly turned, leaned wearily against Smoke Sloan, then slipped to the ground.

Smoke saw that Dell's two *compadres* had their weapons clear. He knew it was too much to ask, yet he was hoping fervently that Lane Vickers would not be wounded. He wanted the odds even. He hated to kill a cripple.

Then, in the sheer fascination one artist feels while watching the technique of another, Smoke Sloan forgot all else save the gun fight in front of him.

Both silvered Colts in his hands now, light and elusive as a leaf in the breeze, Lane Vickers danced clear of the blue powder smoke wreathed about him. His shining golden head bobbed right, then left, and at each move a slim hand jarred to the kickback of a Colt.

THE two gunnies facing Lane Vickers slung lead wildly, desperately. But they never touched him. They withered before the blast of those death-dealing .45s like dry grass before a prairie fire.

Lane Vickers gazed a moment at the two still bodies, turned and moved toward Smoke Sloan. Blue eyes upon Smoke's battered face, he calmly began punching warm shells from his silvered Colts.

"Sorry I never got here sooner," he said. "Even if I did save Dell's life once, I shoulda knowed not to trust him. But with Rangers in Roma, I thought I couldn't risk meetin' Kay, mebbe havin' her find out about me. I hit the saddle, though, when the skunk never got back on schedule. I missed him at the river and the *posada,* too, but I took time to choke outa that greasy Pancho about you savin' Kay. That's why I never got here in time to keep Dell from beatin' you up."

Deliberately, he took Smoke Sloan's filled gunbelts from the limb where they were hanging and buckled them around Smoke's waist. He had started to cut Smoke down from the tree when Kay came running down the path.

Her eyes widened with horror at sight of the three dead outlaws. Then she saw her brother and Smoke Sloan there under the cottonwood. With a little agonized cry, she ran straight to Smoke and put her arms around him.

"Oh, what have they done to you!" she cried. "Do something, Lane! Get him down!"

Gently, Lane Vickers pulled the sobbing girl away from Smoke Sloan. "Sho' now, he's not hurt bad," he soothed, and reaching up with his pocketknife, again started to slash the rope.

"I want you to know what yuh're doin', Vickers," Smoke Sloan said. "You savin' my hide hasn't changed things between us. I reckon yuh know why I'm here. When yuh cut me down it's—you and me."

Lane Vickers stepped back. Voice strangely weary, he said, "Yes, I know why yuh're here, Sloan; I been expectin' yuh — some day. Yuh're goin' to listen to a few things, though, before I cut yuh loose, things yuh might not let me say, afterwards."

"Oh, what is it?" Kay Vickers cried. "Why are you looking at each other that way?"

In the same tired voice, Lane Vickers said, "Yuh see, Kay doesn't know I'm an outlaw with a price on my head. She doesn't know, either, that I once sent an honest young rancher on the owlhoot trail, sent him out with a murder charge hangin' over him. I want her to know now, Sloan, and there's a few things I want you to know.

"When I started the play there in the Drover's Rest, I honestly thought yuh was a cow thief. Parson Lowe and his slick pard, Bat McQueen, fooled me. It was that rat McQueen

give me the tip about the Cross C stuff bein' in the box canyon on yore spread. A year later, when I found out Bat McQueen and the Parson had planted the cows there themselves, I killed McQueen. I aimed to git the Parson, too, but the country got too hot fer me.

"I've allus aimed to go back and finish up, Sloan, but I had to think of Kay, and somehow I never got up the nerve. I come down here and started this little spread, hopin' mebbe I could give Kay some sort of home, hopin' nobody'd ever find me. I see now I guessed wrong, and there's nothin' I kin do about it. There's no way I kin sorta patch up what I done to you, either, Sloan. I know the Chino outfit was behind all the dirty work, but I can't prove it."

He stepped forward and slashed the rope. "I know how yuh feel, Sloan, and I don't blame yuh. I know there's jest one thing will satisfy yuh. Since yuh saved Kay from them skunks, I ort not try to down yuh, but, there's still Kay to be looked after—I'm ready when you are, Sloan."

Smoke Sloan finished rubbing the stiffness from his gun-swift hands. "A touchin' story," he sneered hoarsely. "Damn you, Vickers, yuh can't lie outa what's comin' to yuh!" He crouched slightly, elbows swinging out from his body.

"But he's not lying!" Kay Vickers burst out. "Oh, you fool, can't you see he's not?"

She flung herself forward, grabbed Smoke Sloan's arms. "You've both suffered so much you're stark crazy! But I love you—love you both—and I won't let you do this thing!"

Sobbing, she laid her head on Smoke Sloan's chest, put her arms around him.

Suddenly, then, Smoke Sloan's hate-muddled brain cleared. Suddenly he knew the girl was right. A man with cold nerve enough to face three blood-mad killers, a man with courage enough to stand up and admit his mistakes, was too much man to lie. And Smoke Sloan realized, too, that Lane Vickers had paid for his mistakes, was still paying. Lane Vickers had known bitterness and heartache, even as had Smoke Sloan.

And somehow, now, Smoke Sloan knew Lane Vickers would have saved him, would have stepped into those three killers, anyhow, even if Vickers hadn't already been after them for their doublecrossing stunt. Somehow, he knew now that Lane Vickers was that kind of a man.

In a choked voice, Smoke Sloan said, "Vickers, you and me has both made mistakes. But yores wasn't nothin' like as lowdown snaky as the one I pulled yesterday in Helote. You've paid up yore account with me, Vickers, but I still owe you a debt. I'll settle it, though."

A smile lighted Lane Vickers' somber face. "I don't noways savvy what yuh're drivin' at, pardner," he said. "But I can't see a gent like you ever doin' anything snaky."

Blue eyes met smoky grey ones; and something happened then that was past Kay Vickers' understanding. For suddenly two strong men, two men who had been ready to face each other over smoking six-guns, were gripping hands and grinning like a pair of urchins with their first long pants.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Trail's End*

WATCHING Kay Vickers' face, so delicately flushed in the soft lamplight, Smoke Sloan pushed back from the supper table. Smoke hadn't eaten much. Somehow, he hadn't been hungry. Happiness, he was thinking, made Kay Vickers even more beautiful. And Smoke knew why she was

happy, why her eyes were so bright and why that little secret smile kept playing about her lips.

Coming back from staking out the pinto, he had stopped outside the kitchen door to roll a quirly. Kay and Lane Vickers had been talking.

"Oh, Lane, I'm so happy!" the girl had said. "Now you are safe, you and Smoke Sloan. Those terrible men are dead, and now we can build a real ranch, a real home here—if he'll only stay."

"Yuh love him, don't yuh, Sis?" Lane Vickers had asked gently.

"Yes, Lane, I love him. I love him so much it hurts," had been the soft answer. "If—if he cares for me—oh, Lane, I know I could make him happy!"

And standing outside in the darkness, Smoke Sloan had set his teeth, and for the first time in five bitter years, he had longed for the swift release of death. He had known then as he knew now, with the soft promise in Kay Vickers' eyes torturing him, that happiness was not for Smoke Sloan.

But that wasn't what hurt the worst; for Smoke Sloan had never expected happiness. The thing that twisted and burned like a knife in his vitals was the knowledge that with a single despicable act he had blasted Kay Vickers' life. Parson Lowe and his killers would hit Roma on the morning train, and a few hours later Lane Vickers would be dead.

And it had been he, Smoke Sloan, who had told them where to find Vickers.

Parson Lowe, Spik Madrid and the Goose, along with the Parson's other gunnies, were not tinhorns like Brock Dell. Even the gun magic of Lane Vickers could never save him from that wolf pack.

Smoke Sloan came into the room. Kay was clearing the table.

"You two go out on the porch while I do the dishes," she said.

With the girl's happy laugh squeezing his heart, Smoke followed Lane Vickers onto the little front porch.

They rolled cigarettes, lit up, and sat there watching the Mexican stars. Lane Vickers' calm voice broke the silence.

"A man's got a big chance here. There's plenty grass and water, and this close to the Border, *bandidos* don't bother much. Only thing is, it's kinda lonesome. Fer some time now, I been figurin' on a pardner—a gent who'd stick by me, take the lean with the good. Now I figure I've found that man. What yuh say, Smoke?"

Smoke Sloan flipped away his half smoked quirly; watched it go sailing in a fiery arc, only to fade in the dust. That cigarette, he thought, was like what was happening to him. One brief, sparkling chance for happiness, then life a charred, blackened stump.

IT cameto him then that maybe he and Lane Vickers, together, might beat Parson Lowe's gang. Immediately, though, he knew that wasn't the way. It would be almost certain death to face those gunhands; and he, alone, was to blame for their coming.

Smoke Sloan laughed. Sick inside, he managed to say, "Me settle down? Nope, I've rode too long and too far fer that. I'll be ridin' on, come mornin'."

Smoke knew he had done a fine bit of acting; he could sense Lane Vickers' disappointment. He could imagine Kay's hurt when Lane Vickers told her. Flooding into his mind came the knowledge of all he was losing. Long, quiet days on the range, working with Lane Vickers, building their herd, the sweet, nostalgic breath of the *vara dulce* in his nostrils. And the starlit nights; nights with Kay Vickers, planning their future.

Lane Vickers came to his feet. "I know yuh won't change," he said heavily. "There's a spare bunk in my room—fer tonight."

His eyes on the hazy outline of a distant hill, Smoke said, "I'll amble around awhile."

Straight toward the distant hill he walked. A full moon came up, hung poised on the hilltop. This was the time of the Mexican Moon, he remembered, the time each year when bold Apache warriors had donned their war paint and made raid along the Bravo. This was the time when Parson Lowe and his killers, white-skinned raiders with black murder in their hearts, would swoop down on Lane Vickers' little *rancho*. And like the Indians, they would strike at dawn.

Smoke Sloan sat on a rock and stared, unseeing, at the weird, up-reaching arms of a giant cactus. Smoke Sloan's mind worked in a simple, direct way, and finally it came to him that there was only one thing he could do. First, though, he must warn Lane Vickers.

It was past midnight when Smoke Sloan tiptoed through the kitchen and stopped at Lane Vickers' door. He heard the restless turning of a man in uneasy sleep. Not daring to light the lamp, he eased down the wall to the shelves behind the stove. When he moved cautiously to the kitchen table, he held in his hand a can of tomatoes. He felt in his pocket for a stub pencil.

A few minutes later, astride the jug-headed pinto, Smoke Sloan was loping away from the little adobe. Behind him on the kitchen table, written on the reverse side of a tomato can wrapper, was the terse note:

Vickers:

Parson Lowe and his bunch is coming to get you at sunup. I told them where to find you. You can lay for them at Skull Pass. If they don't show up you can figure you and me square.

Sloan.

And behind Smoke Sloan, too, was a golden-haired, blue-eyed girl, a brave girl he loved more than life.

* * * * *

Smoke Sloan stood just within the waiting room door and watched gray river mist give way before the chill light of dawn. A *paisano* hopped across the tracks and went scuttling into the mesquite beyond, while somewhere a rooster lustily announced the birth of a new day.

The Border Flyer came rushing in, made its disdainful pause, and with bell clanging in impatience, slowly picked up its clicking rhythm and hurried on southward.

To Smoke Sloan, standing there inside the station, came the sardonic thought that it wasn't Roma the train had left behind. It was Death. And with the mirthless smile pulling at his lips, he hitched up his gun-belts and stepped out the door.

Parson Lowe's killer pack—the Goose and Spik Madrid, with fat Sheriff Bradley and a couple more two-gun gents—had ringed around him. In somber black, as always, grim, cadaverous, the Parson held up a flask.

"One drink around," he boomed hollowly. "To Lane Vickers—may his skid to hell be slicker than calf slobber!" Harsh laughter defiled the morning air as the Parson put the flask to his lips.

A SULLEN roar beat down that laughter, and the flask in Parson Lowe's skinny hand seemed to explode. Six bloodthirsty killers jerked about in unison. Jerked about to face Smoke Sloan, one Colt leveled and ready, the other already smoking.

"Sloan!" the Parson choked. "Fan out, fellers! He won't git away agin!"

There came the slap of palms hitting gun-butts, the moan of steel against leather. Six-guns commenced

*(Continued on page 132)*

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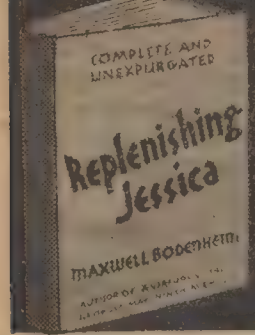

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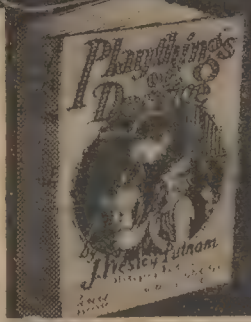


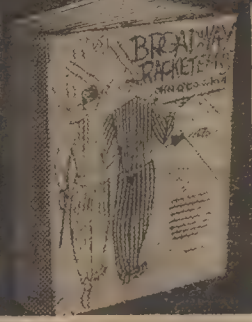


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*(Continued from page 130)*
their hellish dirge. Acrid tang of powder smoke filled the air. Men cursed, and groaned, and died. Still, Death kept striking.

Moving steadily forward, Colts jarring his hands, Smoke Sloan had never thought more clearly. He knew he was soon to die. But he knew too that he would take Parson Lowe and a few more along with him. He would take enough of them so that Lane Vickers, and Kay, would be safe.

And suddenly Smoke Sloan was happy. It was a glorious feeling, to meet death for a girl like Kay!

Smoke saw Parson Lowe sway sideways, bump against the Goose, then go down like some ungainly scarecrow blown over by the wind. Smoke laughed out loud. Till he heard the Goose yell, "We got the damn son!" he never realized he was on the ground himself.

But Smoke Sloan wouldn't stay down. Four hazy figures still were moving toward him. He couldn't leave that many of them behind. He pulled up to his knees, then was weaving on his feet. A strange roaring was in his ears, and his Colts felt heavy. The right one was empty, so he let it drop. Squeezing in both hands the handle of his remaining gun, he staggered to meet the four killers.

Smoke never saw the two horses come pounding around the station platform. Neither did he really see the man who came running up beside him. Somehow, though, he knew who it was there at his elbow even before a voice purred, "Up and at 'em, pardner! Me and you'll clean up these snakes, damn quick!"

Shoulder to shoulder, these two, the fastest gun-hands on the old Rio Bravo, moved forward.

Smoke Sloan was too dazed to wonder why and how; he just knew that Lane Vickers was here. He dropped hammer, saw Spik Madrid wilt in his boots. He heard those silvered Colts beside him give one swift, savage burst. Then it was all over. Then the three killers were down in the dust with their companions, and a dozen horsemen were sweeping around the station platform.

"Rangers," Smoke said wearily. "Make a run for it, pard."

"Hell," was the gentle answer. "I'm plumb tired o' runnin'."

Smoke saw Spik Madrid rise onto one elbow, moved to stand over him. Grim-faced Rangers ringed them in.

Tiny pink bubbles showing at his mouth corners, Spik Madrid gasped, "One gent stepping into a dozen guns!" Out of glazing eyes he looked up at Smoke Sloan. "Yuh're a real man, Sloan, and before I check out there's jest one thing I wanta tell yuh.

"Bat McQueen and the Parson planted them Cross C cows on yore spread, then sent Gunner Fane to kill yuh. I know 'cause I helped 'em. But now, with them two gone, the'll be plenty who'll swear yuh killed Gunner Fane in self-defense. And there'll be plenty who'll clear Vickers. Why, Bat's gun was already clear before Vickers made a move."

Spik Madrid flattened and lay still, but his lips moved as he whispered, *"Maldito,* what a pair of gunhawks!"

Square-jawed Captain Bill Howell growled, "I reckon that cleans yore slate, Sloan. You too, Vickers. I'm right glad. I'd hate to try takin' you two in!"

Kay Vickers pushed through the crowd that had gathered and put her arms around Smoke Sloan. "Oh, Smoke!" she sobbed. "You just rode off, and if Lane hadn't got here you'd be dead!"

Voice lifeless, old, Smoke said, "Then, yuh never saw my note. Yuh don't know I told these buzzards where to find yore brother."

Proudly her head came up. "You idiot," she said softly. "Do you think I could sleep after—after Lane told me? I heard you prowling around the kitchen, and I heard you ride away. Of course I found the note. And as soon as I read it I woke Lane. I knew exactly how a man like you would 'square' things!" Her blue eyes searching his, she said, "And they are square, Smoke. For always!"

"Come on, Smoke," Lane Vickers broke in. "We got to be gittin' along. We got work to do on our spread."

A slow smile breaking the grimness of his face, Smoke Sloan said, "Jest a minute, pardner, I got one little chore to 'tend to," and pulling the girl close with his one good arm, he kissed her squarely on her soft lips.

## BRANDING FIRE CLUB MEMBERS

HERE'S a list of some of the members of our rip-roaring organization of waddies and range girls, THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, sponsored by THRILLING RANCH STORIES. More names next month! The letter "A" in parentheses indicates that the members' age are over 18.

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WELL, folks, another round-up fer us o' the BRANDING FIRE CLUB, an' we're shore *dee*lighted, as that ol' champion o' two-fisted manhood usta say—Teddy Roosevelt, who's now ridin' th' stars with Buffalo Bill, his old friend o' his western days, an' others like 'em. Them fellas was shore men, an' good tuh know.

That gits me thinkin', folks. Tuh be remembered by ev'body as a four-square he-man what's got brains an' two good hands tuh work with an' two good laigs tuh fork over a bronc's back, an' a good laugh inside what keeps bustin' out so's folks likes tuh meet up with yuh is shore fine.

*The Kinda Hombre We Likes*

That sorta fella jest arouses suthin' inside yuh what's good tuh feel. Yuh wakes up, come a bad-weather mornin', takes a squint outa th' window an' finds a durned cold wind blowin' like all hell-an'-gone, snow blottin' out th' foothills, an' cows standin' round with their haids hangin' low an' their tags snugged down flat on their hocks. Li'l calves jammin' clost ag'in their mammas' flanks so's tuh keep from freezin', broncs standing with drooped haids at hitch-racks or corral poles an' lookin' like they wus wishin' they war dead. Some grouchy old hombre plowin' through th' snow in big boots an' cussin' th' hull world—well, th' fella what kin take that squint outa th' window an' chuckle tuh hisself, start whistlin' "My Gal's a High-born Lady," then start singin' "Th' Chisholm Trail," chuck fresh wood on th' fire, pull on his high-heeled gunboats, give his big Stetson a new jerk over one eye an' go chargin' outside with a real cowboy yell, smilin' an' knowin' he kin buck th' whole durned world an' keep th' change, that's th' kinda hombre we all likes.

He's got real red blood in his veins an' th' heart tuh drive through, glad he's alive an' kickin' an' ready fer whatever's ahead. Yessuh, folks, that's th' sort o' human I cottons to, an' so does ev'ry other man an' gal what's got th' makin's inside their breastbones. An' th' same applies tuh gals..

*'Lectric Pussonalities*

When that kinda man's around in bunkhouse or anywheres else, somethin' like uh 'lectric spark shoots through yuh from haid tuh toes an' 'stead o' grouchin' 'cause th' day ain't sunny an' packed with daisies an' a balmy breeze kissin' yore face, an' nobody ain't rode up an' handed yuh a milyun dollars an' a plush-lined limousine with a decked-out chauffeur tuh be at yore beck an' call, yuh jest feels yuh kin lift yoreself up by yore own boot-straps an' fight ten bar'ls wildcats with yore right arm strapped behind yuh.

Reminds me uh th' time Dude Chaney, Jess Lawler an' me gives uh invite tuh three pretty gals what lived down on th' ol' XTY ranch ten mile south o' our Circle-M, where we wus workin' that winter.

*They Knowed Their Beans*

Them three gals jest knowed their beans an' nuthin' couldn't beat 'em when it come to standin' th' gaff.

*(Continued on page 136)*

## RUSTLERS' GAL

*(Concluded from page 115)*

there was no need for their talking. She clung to him trembling, and he was kissing her while she cried at the reaction to the nervous strain. Reed held her tenderly in his arms for a long time.

At last she was able to talk. She tried to explain to him.

REED kissed her again. "Don't tell me. I heard yuh telling Rankin about how yuh owned this place. That accounts for everything—except just one item."

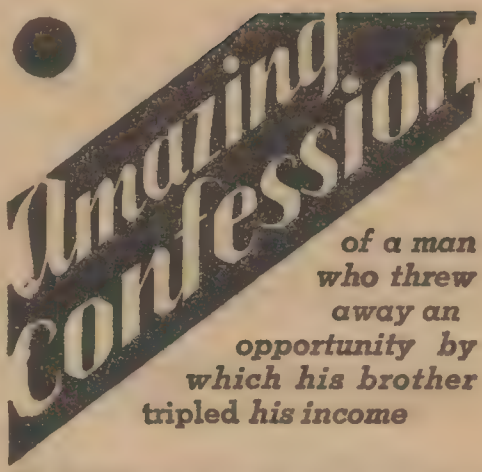
"What is that?" the girl asked.

"Nothing much, except that as far as I know, *I* am the one who owns this place. I came up here to find out where the cattle were going."

The girl sat up and looked at him, puzzled, with that old troubled look returning to her face. "I can't understand that," she said. "The place belonged to my uncle and another man. They were both killed in an accident. I inherited my uncle's share, and I was told that no relatives of the other man, Bob Reed, had been found." Then her eyes widened. "Oh, your name's Reed, isn't it? Then you're—"

Reed laughed in relief, and took the girl in his arms again. "I guess there's nothing for us to fight about, Mary. It looks like we've been partners all along and didn't know it. Yes, I'm Bob Reed's nephew. So yuh're Tom Malone's niece, and heir. I heard there was such a person, back East in school, so I didn't exactly expect to find my partner in the middle of a midnight rustler fight. Yuh're not a tenderfoot at all. Do yuh think that, as partners, we can keep business from interfering with love—or love from interfering with business?"

"We can sure try—cowboy," she answered from the depths of his shoulder.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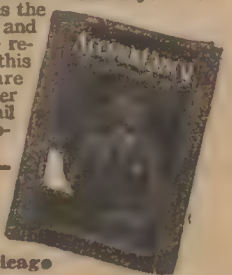

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## AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

*(Continued from page 134)*

When we rode up tuh th' corral at their home it wus shore snowin' an' blowin' an' 'bout four o'clock in th' afternoon.

Not a ray o' sunshine nowheres in th' sky, an' ef we all went tuh that baile what wus tuh be give over on th' Gardner ranch, ten mile west, it'd shore mean facin' rough ridin'. Country down in that part o' Nevada's plenty rough an's got a heap o' durned arroyos, rocky up an' down, an' when it's winter th' snows shore gits deep an' treacherous. Man's apt tuh sink in it plumb over his head, an' his bronc too. We lugged 'long with us a new fella what'd come down from Wyomin' an' had told us he war a humdingin' top-hand an' had rode through snows an' blizzards so durned bad that yuh hadda carry a lighted torch on yore saddle-horn so's yuh could melt th' snow ahead.

Yessuh, folks, that hombre talked like he war Wild Bill an' Kit Carson all wrapped up in one bundle. He shore looked th' part, bein' over six foot an' hittin' th' scales around two hunderd pounds. Looked like he could go head-on through a blizzard an' leave a big hole behind 'im all th' way.

### *He Starts Growlin'*

Them three gals had a darned sweet gal cousin stayin' with 'em an' 'cept fer her not bein' much of a rider, she wus all right an' plumb nice to all th' fellas in th' Rawhide Valley; only bein' kinda short on forkin' a saddle, wasn't nobody wanted tuh ask 'er tuh that baile on th' Gardner ranch, 'cause no cowpoke owned a carriage an' pair.

It hadda be bronc-back or stay home, that time. Well, th' gals got all rigged up in heavy ridin' clothes, wrapped their fancy duds in slickers an' tied 'em tuh th' latigo straps on their cantles, an' away we all went.

Our three gals an' their cousin kept laffin' an' teasin' an' payin' no 'tenshun tuh th' cold wind or th' snow, actin' so's us three fellas felt

plumb proud of 'em. But Mister Wyomin' started growlin' afore we'd rode two miles, stuck his durned haid down intuh his fur-collar an' we heerd 'im cussin' mean. He damned th' snow, th' weather, th' bronc he war ridin', th' darkness slippin' over th' desert, th' arroyos we hadda cross, an' 'bout ev'rything else. All his chinnin' 'bout havin' rode through all th' blizzards th' Northwest ever seen proved tuh be jest nuthin' but so much habla of a windbag.

### *We Got Plumb Sick of It*

Th' gals an' us three fellas got plumb sick o' hearin' that kinda whinin', speshul from a big hunk uv a hombre like him. An' afore coupla more miles had been rid, he lugs out a bottle o' red-eye an' wants us all tuh take a snip, but he took first drink hisself an' shore punished that ol' bottle.

But th' rest uv us said "No," an' fer sev'ral reasons. Us three hombres warn't members o' no Chatauqua, an' figgered a friendly li'l drink at proper times war right an' sociable, but durin' a harsh winter wind on th' desert, durin' a blizzard-like snowstorm, ain't sech a time.

Cowmen l'arns that by experience. Th' first warmth th' snake p'ison produces is allers follered, sech times, by feelin' colder'n colder.

### *A Promise Goes*

Besides, our gals never drank an' their Ma an' Pa had asked us tuh do no drinkin' while th' gals war with us—an' a promise goes, with true riders o' th' cow country. Don't nuthin' have tuh be writ down an' signed offishul, thataway, no time, no *suh*. So that Wyomin' hero wus bustin' th' code well's makin' a durned fool o' hisself. It got under our goat, final, an' Jess Lawler, Dude Chaney an' me started squintin' at each other an' formin' plans in our cabesas.

They's heaps o' ways tuh git rid o' somebody what ain't wanted, an' us cowpokes sorta whispered together as

*(Continued on page 138)*


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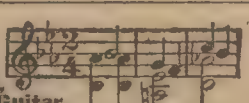

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*(Continued from page 137)*

we rode on ahaid with th' four gals. An' wanta tell yuh right yere that that cousin gal what hadn't seemed able tuh sit a bronc much, proved a hunderd percent game, never said a single word 'bout how th' poundin' o' th' saddle musta been makin' her wish fer one o' them air mattrasses we reads 'bout an' what Eastern tourists lugs along when they come West tuh "rough" it.

### *By His Lonesome*

Final, us three fellas figgered a plan tuh leave Mister Wyomin' by his lonesome. Th' road over 'crost th' desert tuh th' Gardner ranch was plain, what any cowboy oughta be able tuh foller, so we didn't expect th' durned Hero o' th' Hull Northwest would go git hisself lost ef we pulled out an' left 'im tuh come on or go back, whichever he might decide tuh do. Our gals war as disgusted with 'im as we was, an' let 'im come follerin' along 'bout ten yards behind us. He war still growlin' an' swiggin' that licker ev'ry so often—an' that means durned frequent.

Th' bronc he war forkin' wus one o' our gentlest hosses, but he wus cussin' th' beast an' slammin' it over th' haid now an' then with his quirt, somethin' ain't no real cowboy ever does. Hittin' a hoss over th' haid's like strikin' a baby, an' don't never git a rider nowheres.

### *Dude Has a Plan*

So, as we rid along, Dude Chaney, who was ridin' one o' our good old-time buckers but knowed how tuh make th' hoss go along quiet, drags tuh a halt jest afore we started crossin' a snow-packed arroyo an' says tuh that Wyomin' gent:

"Old-timer," an' that name, what Western men uses only towards dyed-in-th'-wool punchers, makes Jess an' me grin an' tells us Dude's got a plan. "Old-timer," he says, soft-like, "let's swap hosses. Way yo're cussin' that bronc yo're on shows he's low-down mean, but I kin manage 'im. Yuh'll be warmer ef yuh forks this yere bronc I'm on."

### *He Made the Swap*

Well, that hombre musta figgered anything was good as a change. He makes th' swap, cussin' that his bronc warn't wuth a damn an' couldn't keep up.

So they swaps, but Dude he manages tuh give a jerk to th' rear cinch uv his hoss afore swappin'; an' whenever th' rear cinch war tightened on old "Bug-eye," as we called that outlaw-hoss, things shore'd happen.

Dude swings up into th' fella's saddle an' Mister Whiner crawls up on old Bug-eye an' jabs in th' irons.

Folks, when uh outlaw bronc's chilly, th' rear cinch tightened thataway an' th' rider digs in his rowels, th' world gits whirlin' around like all hell. Last we seen uh Mister Growler, he war grabbin' leather, hatless, an' old Bug-eye war bustin' th' sky ev'ry hop an' squealin' like all gitout.

Dude, he lets his eyes grow big an' yells wild-like:

"My Gawd, folks, that fella's gone wild, crazy, an' he's luggin' a gun. Let's go, quick!"

### *We Busted Away*

Fella really didn't have no gun, 'cept his mouth, which shore war spewin' hot languidge, but th' gals ketched on, with a wink from Dude, an' we busted away from there full speed ahaid. An' th' fallin' snow, with its mist, closed Mister Wyomin' from our sight. We reached th' Gardner ranch right soon after that an' got swingin' our gals aplenty in th' baile, speshul in them ol' round dances us cowfolks allers loves, an' durned ef th' young cousin warn't th' best dancer there, even after all th' bumpin' she'd stood durin' th' cold ride, an' no gal's cheeks war ever rosier.

Wind-up uh her displayin' all that courage got Dude, as usual, fallin' in love ag'in, an' he borrered dollar-eighty cents from me so's he could buy her one o' them fancy ingagemint rings up in town.

That Wyomin' gent never did show up, an' when we all got home tuh th' gals' ranch, their dad told us th'

*(Continued on page 140)*


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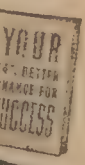


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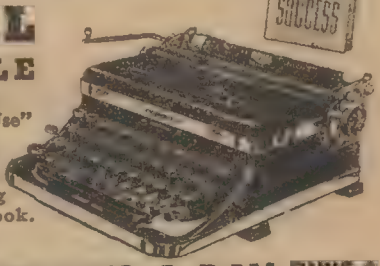

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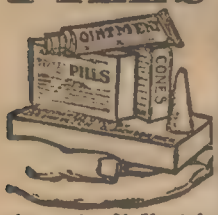

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*(Continued from page 139)*

fella'd come home leadin' old Bug-eye through th' snow, had demanded his time an' pulled out fer other parts—an' we hopes he's still walkin', th' durned growler!

Bet old Bug-eye bucked 'im off a dozen times afore he hit th' gals' home. We gave ol' Bug-eye uh extry feed an' whispered right nice things in his long ears, too. He'd give good service—an' riddance. An' that's what had oughta happen tuh anybody, man or gal, what cain't take it.

### *Grit-Packed Folks*

But ain't no sech fellas or gals in our BRANDING FIRE CLUB, not on yore life, folks. We're jest a bunch o' grit-packed hombres an' hombresses what'll stand together come hell or high water, an' we kin prove it by these dandy letters what comes rompin' in. Jest travel yore old eyes over some of 'em, folks.

First letter we run across this mornin' is one from Indianapolis, which shore is mighty interestin'.

Dear Tex:

I am an ardent admirer of your stories; have been a devoted THRILLING RANCH STORIES fan for almost two years but I really believe you have reached the peak in fine entertainment with the story, MISS FORTY-FIVE by Larry A. Harris. It is convincing, well-written, has a fine plot and the author evidently "knows his stuff." The very fact that it seems to have a slightly different angle makes it refreshing.

I don't often write to editors about stories, but I feel that here is one author that merits a good boost up the ladder of success.

I also liked Alan R. Bosworth's story, LOVE IS WHERE YOU FIND IT, but I'm sure I shall only be one among many when I say—Give us more stories by Larry A. Harris.

Bess M. Watson.

Indianapolis, Ind.

Yes, sir, kinda sends a warm glow stealin' over all of us when we gits a letter like that, tellin' us jest why folks like a certain story, or what they likes best 'bout th' magazine. We're shore obliged tuh yuh, Miss Bess.

We keep right on drawin' out a heap of mighty fine letters from read-

CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS IN

ers an' members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, an' like we keep sayin', they come from jest 'bout all over the world. Here's one that comes from England.

Dear Tex:

I've just started to read your book. I have read many different types of cowboy and western stories since I was a kid, and THRILLING RANCH STORIES contains excellent stories of life in the West.

I should like to exchange letters with any of the members of the BRANDING FIRE CLUB as I wish to be enrolled as a member. I suppose you would like to hear something about me. I am 14½ years old, 5 feet 5 inches tall, have black hair, dark brown eyes, dark complexion and weigh 9 stone, also am the eldest girl of a family of eight. Hobbies are reading, climbing and collecting cowboy songs. I hope to hear from you soon. M. Barnsley.

The Grange, Blenheim Rd.,
Deal, Kent, England.

Thanks, hope yuh'll be hearin' from some of the folks.

Here's an interesting letter from Illinois.

Dear Tex:

I've just finished the last issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I've been reading your magazine for two years but I think this last one was best of all. I liked particularly the stories, MISS FORTY-FIVE by Larry A. Harris, LOVE DRIVES A BARGAIN by Eugene Clancy and FUGITIVE HEARTS by Tom Curry. Let's have more like them. MISS FORTY-FIVE was especially good. The heroine, Lois, certainly seemed real and the whole story was different from the usual.

You have a great magazine. It goes off the newsstands so fast that it is sometimes hard to find. Keep up the good work.

Edward Tompkins.
2146 N. Dayton St., Chicago, Illinois.

Mighty nice to hear all them nice things 'bout old THRILLING RANCH STORIES and we're shore thankin' yuh a heap for it.

Seems like it's gettin' on to the time when ole Tex better jest sorta look an' listen while th' folks speaks for theirselves. Get more space for letters thataway, and we're all interestin' in hearin' from as many of the folks as possible in each issue.

Dear Tex:

Is there any chance for a lonely Hungarian reader to sit by the fire and swap

*(Continued on page 142)*


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Nervous Debility, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Lame Back, Lumbago, Sexual Weakness, Kidney and Bladder Trouble, Chronic Constipation, Despondency, Restlessness at Night are only some of the ailments, differing in individuals, that can often be ascribed to lesion of the Prostate Gland.

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Each month we receive scores of unsolicited letters of gratitude and appreciation from users of the Prosager—the following letters are typical of those received.

Mr. S. W. Harrison, 446 N. Main St., Brewer, Maine, writes: I have received wonderful relief by means of the Prosager. It certainly has made a new man out of me. Mr. J. W. Geary, 18 Poinsettia Ave., Sebring, Fla., states in his letter: Received the Prosager May 20th, my prayers have been answered. I have used it six times and am a different man. Mr. A. P. Hoffman, 8104 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, O., writes: The Prosager is helping very much and would not be without it. Mr. S. V. Kindig, Box 213, Fairplay, Colorado, states: I feel 20 years younger and I would not take anything for the Prosager if I could not get another.

*We do not publish our users' letters unless we have the permission to do so.*

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## MEN PAST 40

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*(Continued from page 141)*

yarns. I have purchased my second copy of THRILLING RANCH STORIES and it sure is a winner.

I am 5 feet 3 inches tall, weigh 120 pounds and am 17 years old. Have brown hair and brown eyes. I would like for Hungarians, Gypsies, Mexicans, Spaniards and orphans to write to me, please.

A thousand cheers for THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

Miss M. Setlock.
Route 4, Box 252, Asheville, N. C.

Dear Tex:

Here I come again to thank you for my membership card and to tell you how proud I am to belong to your club. I am a lonesome country girl who enjoys reading good letters and I do hope that I get lots of them and I will do my best to answer them all. So come on, all you cowboys and cowgirls and write to me and I will try to tell you something about myself and this beautiful country that I live in.

I have red hair, fair complexion. Now that gives you some idea of what I look like so I will hush before Tex tells me that this isn't very interesting. So don't fail to write to me, pen pals, for I will be watching and waiting for the postman every day.

Eunice R. Bowdoin.
Route 1, Mansfield, Georgia.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for several months and have enjoyed each and every one, and always will. My favorite hobbies are reading, writing, horseback riding, dancing and swimming.

I am 5 feet 4 inches tall, blond hair and brown eyes. I am looking for pen pals and would like to hear from cowboys from all over the world, and am also willing to exchange snapshots.

So bye-bye, Tex—please wish me luck with my mail.

Milly Rudolph.
P. O. Gonubie, East London,
South Africa.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and enjoy it very much. I also would like to join your BRANDING FIRE CLUB. I am a girl of 17, have brown hair and brown eyes and I am 5 feet 7. Best of all I like writing and reading. I would like to hear real soon from some friend out there. So come on and show us what you can do. I will be sure to answer all letters I receive.

Dorothy M. Hunter.
1 West Chestnut St., Delmar, Del.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for a long time now

and I sure like it. I hope there is a chance for me to get some pen pals. I have always wanted pals in other countries, so have a heart and send some letters my way. I am 5 feet 4 inches tall, have brown hair and grey eyes. I go to college where I have a swell time. I am interested in everything. So here's hoping to hear from anyone and everyone.

Joyce Crawford.
18 Matao Street, Hamilton,
Waikato, New Zealand.

Dear Tex:

Here comes a letter from the heart of the West, or in other words Arizona, where the sun shines every day—land of cactus, sage brush, mesquite and greasewood. Where about half the people are Indian and Mexican, and by the way you never find people anywhere more friendly than the Mexicans and Indians. They will go out of their way to do a favor for a person, if said person doesn't have the misguided idea that he is better than they are.

I could write books on Arizona and then not say all the things I would like to say. But if any of you folks want to find out more about this country why just write to me and ask your questions. My hobbies are collecting and exchanging cactus plants and automobile license plates, and for every old license plate sent me from any foreign country I will send either an old Arizona license, or six choice, all different cactus plants. Which do you want? I am a young man, age 36, height 5 ft. 6 inches, weigh 138 lbs. Will welcome letters from persons interested. I like THRILLING RANCH STORIES as they cover the West much the best. *Adios,*

Al Davis.
c/o The Davis Trailer Co.,
Tucson, Arizona.

### *Drop 'Em a Line*

FOLKS like them allers plays th' game o' life high, wide an' handsome, betcha life. An' I asks yuh all tuh drop 'em a line an' welcome 'em intuh our BRANDING FIRE CLUB an' give 'em a hand. It's human tuh want comp'ny, an' that's what they're yellin' fer. So git busy, one an' all, an' let 'em know th' warmth 'round this old fire. We ain't got a quitter in our whole gang, an' that goes straight. Gals an' fellas joinin' up with us is guaranteed tuh have bright eyes, smilin' faces an' backbones what kin stand up without no whinin' when things get tough.

An' now, pals o' th' saddle, don't put it off until tomorrer but write

*(Continued on page 144)*

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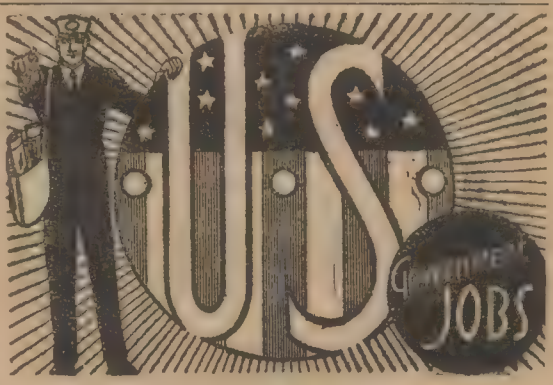


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*(Continued from page 143)*

a letter to ol' Tex Brown now. I'm jest gettin' up nerve to ask if I kin take Miss Blondie yere, our boss's secretary, out tuh one o' th' high-hat night clubs, git her a swell supper, dance with 'er in my first pair o' pumps, an' tuck th' bill under th' boss' desk blotter after I scrawls 'crost it them joyful words: "Offise account, advertisin'."

He sometimes gives sech bills th' one-eye, but he pays 'em in th' end, being' th' best ramrod this ol' ranch ever seen, bar none. An' ef I kin jest git me a swally-tailcoat, mebbe my nerve'll come up so's I kin ask Miss Blondie that darned question I been tryin' tuh speak fer th' last several years. Sometimes I think she's gonna say "Yes."

*Next Month's Yarns*

An' last evenin', folks, her an' th' boss an' me went over all th' yarns we're gonna hand yuh in our next number. They're plumb top-hand, ev'ry darned one, hand-picked an' snortin' with romance an' action from tail tuh horns. Yo're gonna read

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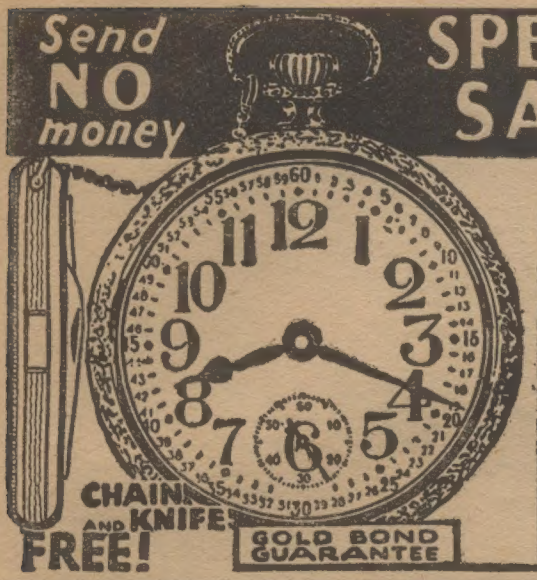


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An' yo're gonna read DESTINY CUTS THE CARDS, a novelette of Colt carnage, by Ralph Cummins. Swell yarns, all—none better!

An' afore yuh shuts th' next HIGH, WIDE AN' HANDSOME number, yo're gonna have read a lotta more stories jest as good. An' till then, git shovin' oats an' alfalfa tuh yore broncs, for we're gonna ride some hard in that January issue, blizzards or sun, don't make no diff'rence tuh us. Hola an'—Gawd bless yuh.

Keep yore haids high an' yore boots on th' ground. I'm countin' on yuh never tuh quit. Git yore friends sendin' in the coupon.

—TEX BROWN.

*Read*

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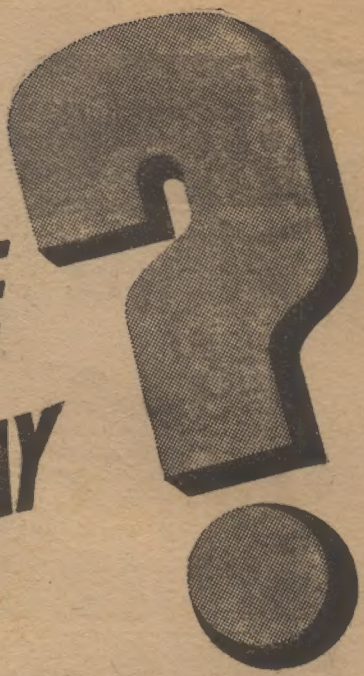

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There is no greater tragedy in the world than that of a man who stays in the rut all his life, when with just a little effort he could advance.

Make up your mind today that you're going to train yourself to do some one thing well. Choose the work you like best in the list below, mark an X beside it, and, without cost or obligation, at least get the full story of what the I. C. S. can do for you.


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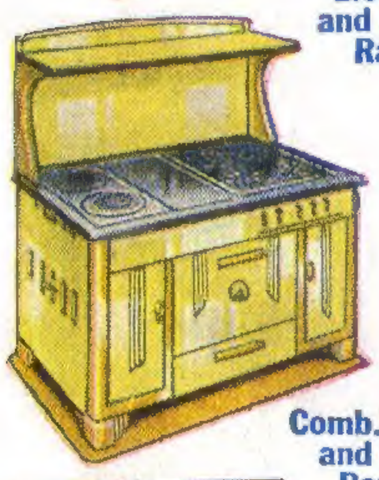
# THEY SAID A STOVE LIKE THIS WOULD COST A LOT--BUT IT DIDN'T. I GOT IT AT THE FACTORY PRICE!

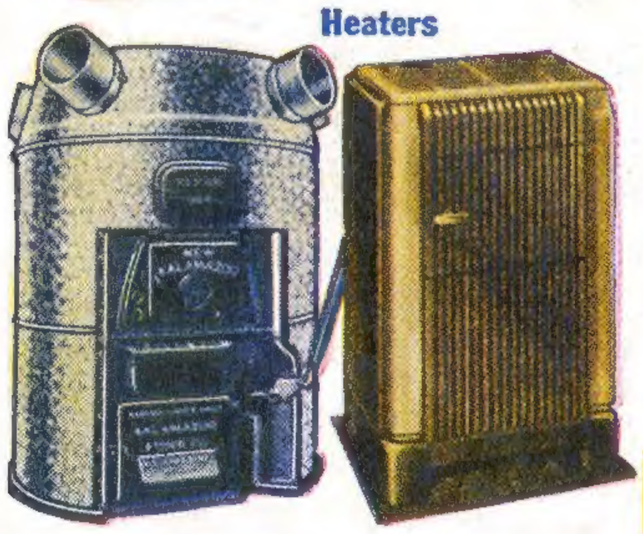
New Comb. Electric and Coal Range



Comb. Gas and Coal Ranges

Gas Stoves

Heaters



Free Furnace Plans

## "—and I paid for it by the month"

"Take the advice of one who knows—mail the coupon today for the *new FREE Kalamazoo Catalog*. You'll save yourself time and money.

"I wasted days looking at all makes of stoves. They said that what I wanted would cost a lot. Then . . . came my Kalamazoo Catalog. In *ten minutes* I found *exactly the stove quality I wanted*—and surprise of surprises—*it cost less than I had expected to pay.*

### Nearly 200 Styles and Sizes

"Mail the coupon! You'll find nearly 200 styles and sizes of Heaters, Ranges and Furnaces—many illustrated in beautiful pastel colors—actually more bargains than in 20 big stores.

### As Little as 12c a Day

"You'll be amazed to find how far your pennies stretch. Some stoves cost as little as 12c a day at the FACTORY PRICE—and 18 months to pay, if you wish.

### Stoves Sent on Trial—1,200,000 Users

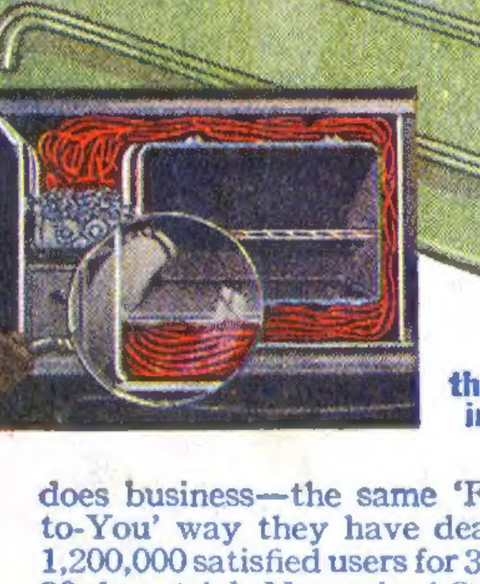
"You'll like the way Kalamazoo does business—the same 'Factory-to-You' way they have dealt with 1,200,000 satisfied users for 37 years. 30 days trial. No urging! Service is fast—24 hour shipments. Satisfaction or money back.

### New Ranges—New Heaters

"In this Catalog you'll see new modern stoves of sparkling beauty—Porcelain Enamel Coal and Wood Ranges in white and delicate pastel colors—new Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges—and something altogether new, *a Combination Electric and Coal Range*. Also new Gas Stoves—Oil Stoves—New Coal and Wood Circulating Heaters—Garage Heaters—Furnaces (free plans)—all at Kalamazoo FACTORY PRICES.

***"My Suggestion is:***—mail the coupon AT ONCE for free Catalog! Don't take my word—see it yourself. See what you save at FACTORY PRICES."

Coal and Wood Ranges




"A Kalamazoo Direct to You"
Trade Mark Registered

KALAMAZOO STOVE & FURNACE COMPANY
493 Rochester Ave., Kalamazoo, Mich.

*Warehouses:* Utica, New York; Youngstown, Ohio; Reading, Pennsylvania; Springfield, Massachusetts

Kalamazoo Stove & Furnace Co., Mfrs.,
493 Rochester Ave., Kalamazoo, Mich.

Dear Sirs: Send me FREE FACTORY CATALOG. Check articles in which you are interested.

- ☐ Coal & Wood Heaters
- ☐ Coal & Wood Ranges
- ☐ Comb. Electric & Coal Range
- ☐ Comb. Gas & Coal Range
- ☐ Oil Ranges
- ☐ Gas Ranges
- ☐ Furnaces

*Name*.....
*(Print name plainly)*

*Address*.....

*City*.....*State*.....



Approved by Good Housekeeping Institute

oven that floats in flame

**OUR SENSATIONAL NEW 1937 CATALOG NOW READY! NEARLY 600 PAGES OF UNUSUAL NOVELTIES. SEND 3c FOR IT!**

## BROADCAST *thru your radio* TALK - SING - PLAY

**BROADCAST** your voice on programs coming through your own radio set—make announcements from any part of the house—inject wise cracks, **josh and mystify friends.** Imitate radio stars, practice crooning, singing, radio acting, etc. Do a "Ben Bernie" or a "Rudy Valee."

### World Mike

Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. **Not a toy.** Put on your own programs at home, parties, club affairs, etc. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

**Price Postpaid 25c**

### DELUXE MIKE

Large, substantial, all-metal mike. Practise radio singing, broadcasting, programs, etc., thru your own radio. Reproduces voice in loud, clear tone without distortion. Regular table model—can be held in hand. Guaranteed. Connected with 6 ft. cut cords. Price **75c**

## MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

*Listen to Music Programs and Sports Everywhere You Go—Loud Tone*

Beautiful clear tone while you walk! The amazing midget pocket radio gives you all the entertainment of a radio wherever you are—in the country, office, on a boat, in your hotel, in bed, on bicycles, **ANYWHERE** and **EVERYWHERE.** Size of a cigarette package, yet it operates perfectly. **Beautiful clear tone.** Range, 50 miles. No static or noise. **No batteries, no tubes, no crystals to adjust,** just one moving dial to locate stations. New sensitive rectifier and high efficiency design.

Not a toy. **Price Postpaid $1.00.** Earphone, 89c, Phone & Radio Set $1.79.

## Wireless Transmitter Broadcasting Set

**$1**

**First again!** First with the low-priced crystal radio, then the famous World Mike, then the All Wave World Wide Radios, then the Dollar Pocket Radio, and **NOW** a genuine RADIO TRANSMITTER that sends out messages by wireless, for **only $1.00, plus 10c postage.** Note these sensational Features:

- ★ **Can be picked up on a suitable Radio Receiver**
- ★ **Not a Mike, but a complete Broadcasting Set**
- ★ **Complete with Key, in Kit Form**
- ★ **Plugs in to any AC-DC circuit**
- ★ **Uses 2 oscillating tubes**

**Complete Transmitter, $1.00 plus 10c post. Tubes (uses 2) Each 50c**

## Telegraph Set

A Private Electric Telegraph set for only 15c! Use it as a practice set or send messages to friends (sending and receiving). Learn the code easily and quickly. Be an expert operator. Key, sounder, magnet, etc. mounted on wooden base, complete with Western Union blanks, code and instructions. (without battery)

All for **15c**

**Book on Electricity**

Add 10c for 64 page book written specially for boys. Tells how to make batteries, dynamos, motors, radios, telegraph apparatus, coils, etc. Price 10c.

## SWIM IN ONE TRIAL! WATER WINGS

Water Wings impart such confidence in water that everyone can learn to swim and float at once. Expert swimmers use them to cover long distances, to swim in deep water, etc. Will support up to 180 lbs. Can be carried in the pocket and blown up when arriving at seashore. Price **25c**

## YACHT CAPS

**25c**

Smart, snappy, just what every real boy is wearing. Cool and comfortable. White Twill Yacht Cap, with black oilcloth peak, sweat band, gold braid and brass buttons with anchor. Price **25c**

White Duck Yacht Cap, superior quality duck, white celluloid cap, gold cord, brass buttons and red, white and blue anchor on front. State size. Price postpaid **35c**

## CHAMELEON 25c

A LIVE PET

### WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR!

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color. Study its habits. Wear one on the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Shoots out its tongue to catch flies and insects for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. About 4 in. long. Shipped to any address in USA by mail. We guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. Only **25c**

## SILENT DEFENDER

Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs and night watchmen as a means of protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand. Useful in an emergency. Aluminum. Wt. 2 oz. Pocket size.

**SILENT DEFENDER. Price 25c**

## Win Prize Contests

Tells the best methods and principles for winning some of the big prize contests which are announced almost daily. People make tidy sums of money by solving the various contests. Methods and principles presented have been selected from those advanced by the winners of some of the hardest and largest contests staged thus far. **Price 10c.**

**600 page Novelty Catalog, 3c**

## FORTUNE TELLING CARDS

### Tomorrow?

What will it bring for you? What will happen? Let Madam Le-Normand's Fortune Telling Cards predict the future! Just get a deck and friends for miles around will want to get in on the fun. At parties, gatherings, evenings, etc., everyone will want you to tell their fortunes. It fascinates them. Yet there is nothing difficult to telling the fortunes—every card is plainly marked with its meaning and the connection between the cards becomes at once apparent. Complete directions with each deck. **Price 25c per deck.** Deluxe deck with 53 ivory finished cards. **75c.** postpaid.

## BIG ENTERTAINER

326 Jokes & Riddles, 25 Tricks, 10 Parlor Games, 73 Toasts, 13 Stories, 105 Money-making Secrets, 22 Monologs, 21 Puzzles, Problems, Comic recitations, Funny Readings, 10 Parlor Pastimes, 13 Flirtations, 1000 Names & their Meanings, 10 Picture Puzzles, 37 Amusing Experiments, Deaf and Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Fortune Teller, Fortunes with Cards, Crystal, Tea Cup, etc., Hypnotism, Ventriloquism, Cut-outs for Checkers, Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Anagrams, 25 card Tricks, Crystal Gazing, etc., etc. Only **15c**

## JOY BUZZER 28c

Funniest novelty ever invented! Fits the finger like a ring, but concealed in palm is the **TICKLER.** The Buzzer, or tickler, contains a clockwork mechanism that is wound up. Whenever it is touched, the mechanism is released, giving the victim a shock. Every time you shake hands, your friend will get a violent shock. Touch them on the back, and watch them jump. They will hit the ceiling if they sit on it. Under a sheet it feels like a mouse. Use it as a "tic-tac" on window. Hundreds of uses. ONLY.... **28c**

## Detective Make-Up Kit

Contains everything needed to alter the face to represent any character: the Beautiful Heroine, the vicious Villain, the Charming Beau, the Comic Old Lady, the Clown, The Hobo, the Negro Minstrel and many others. Just a few touches and the expression is entirely changed so that even your most intimate friend will not know you. **Amateur's Make-Up Kit. Price $1.00**

**Sex Indicator** Fascinating discovery that is used by some to tell the sex of eggs, handwriting, etc. Price 10c

## FIELD GLASSES 25c

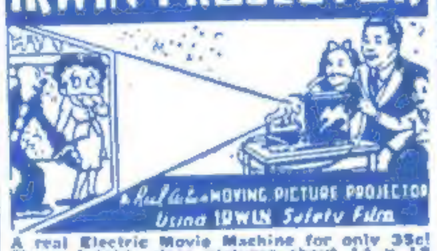
What a bargain! Real genuine Field Glasses with six power magnification. Center piece quick, one finger focussing. Permits full, unhampered, two eyed vision that gives remarkable scope and clarity. Swell for nature study, hiking, sports, and a million other things. Complete with cord, packed in box. ONLY **25c**

## Pocket Telescope

*Eagle-Eye Vision*
**Six Power**
**25c**

Big, 3 draw, 6 power telescope for only 25c! Swell for outdoors, nature study, sports, looking at the moon. Converted into Solar telescope by using smoked glass so you can see sun spots, etc. 5" long. **Price 25 cents**

## IRWIN PROJECTOR




A real Electric Movie Machine for only 35c! Shows bright, clear pictures about 14 x 18 inches in size. Just insert the film, turn the crank and watch the pictures as long as you like! Uses 2 flashlight cells obtainable anywhere. Bright red enameled steel case, measuring 5x3x3 inches. Complete with bulb, ready to use. 16 mm. film. **Price 35c. FILM,** choice of Felix the Cat, Wild West, Mutt & Jeff, Tom Mix, etc., **15c EACH.**

## ALL WAVE WORLD WIDE RADIOS

Remarkable results—simple operation—low prices! **15 to 600 meters. Gets police calls, foreign stations anywhere,** code, short wave, foreign and domestic broadcasts, etc. with remarkable volume and efficiency. Each set complete without tube, phone, battery or aerial.

**ONE TUBE BATTERY SET.** phone volume. Kit ..... **$1.55**
**Wired,** ready to operate, **$2.30.**

**SUPER TWO TUBE BATTERY SET** Gives better volume & reception. Complete kit. **$2.00**
**Wired,** ready to operate... **$2.75**

**ELECTRIC TWO TUBE.** Operates on house current. Uses no batteries. Powerful, sensitive. Kit, **$3.00**
**Wired,** ready to operate, **$3.75**

## CRYSTAL RADIO 25c

This is a radio in itself as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 25 miles of a station (or up to 100 miles under good conditions). All you need is an aerial & ear phone. Completely assembled & wired with supersensitive crystal, stand, base, crystal cup, arm with cat's whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. **25c**

## WIND LIGHTER

### LIGHTS IN ANY WEATHER

Famous Wind Lighter now being offered at a price lower than ever before. Brass in bright nickel finish, with sliding cylinder. When in use the flame is protected from the wind and can be used in almost any weather. Length 3¼ in. Few lighters are so reliable and so all-round useful as this one. Ring attachment on end so it may be attached to watch chain. **Automatic Wind Lighter 25c**
**Extra Flints, 3 for 10c.**

## Hill Bill Band

**5 PIECES**

Consists of 1 Harmonica, 1 Warbler, 1 Humstone, 1 Kazoo, 1 Flute, with complete instructions. Play Hill Billy songs, Mountain, Cowboy, Negro, Popular, Dance, etc. music. At the beach, on picnics, at home—EVERYWHERE. And boy, oh boy can you go to town! Get five fellows and let 'er swing.

**Hill Billy Band Set 15c**

## CRYSTAL GAZING BALLS

**A Look Into The Future**

Guaranteed perfect in shape. A crystal of not less than 2 inches should be used, but the larger crystals are suggested; a larger vision is seen, consequently better results are obtained. Get a crystal—use it constantly and see what it will accomplish for you. It may mean SUCCESS, HAPPINESS, RICHES, LOVE.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 inch | Crystal | $1.00 |
| 3 inch | Crystal | $2.50 |
| 4 inch | Crystal | $5.50 |
| 5 inch | Crystal | $9.50 |
| 6 inch | Crystal | 12.50 |
| Crystal | Stand | 75c |

## NOVELTY ASH TRAYS

**Popular Designs**

Three sensational brilliantly glazed, imported china novelties. Bright colors, snappy designs. Your choice: Outhouse Novelty 15c. Ash Receiver (center) 25c. China Toilet (right) 15c. All Postpaid.

## CIGARETTE MAKER

Roll your own and save money. Better and quicker—saves more than half. Neat, useful, handy Pocket size, weighs 1½ ounce. Nickel plated metal. Price **25c**
Postpaid

## Cigarette Stinkers

These Cigarette Stinkers can be placed in any cigarette so they will not be noticed, yet when the victim lights up and takes a few puffs, the cigarette throws off an awful "stink." A good joke for moochers. **6 Stinkers 10c**

## LUMINOUS PAINT

**LUMINOUS PAINT,** when applied to an object, emits rays of white light, rendering it visible in the dark. The darker the night—the brighter it shines. Simple to use—you can do it! Apply some to the dial of your watch so you can tell time at night. Paint pushbuttons, switches any thing, everything with it. **Small Bottle, 25c, Medium size 50c. Large size $1.00 postpaid.**

## Resurrection Plant

**Great curiosity.** Place in water, plant opens up and starts to grow in a few minutes. Taken out it dries up and goes to sleep until put in water again. Lasts almost forever. Brilliant green when growing. Each, 10 cents. 3 for 25c.

## INSERT A COIN AND OUT COMES A DELICIOUS CHOCOLATE BAR

### *Thrift Bank and Slot Machine*

**FREE!** This sensational new-type bank is yours—yours to have and to hold—without any cost. Just think of having this handy bank around and as a penny, nickel or dime is dropped in—out comes a chocolate bar, all wrapped up! Leave the bank around the house and you'll find that it fills up with money while you're gone.

### HOW TO GET YOUR BANK FREE!

This slot-machine bank cannot be bought. **There is just one way to get it**—send **$1.00** for 70 chocolate bars and we will include **the bank free!** Made of sheet metal with regular locked door so you can open, remove money and refill with chocolate. On the front is a slot to drop coin in, and a glass window showing bars. Red, yellow and green. Send a dollar bill ($1.00) for the 70 bars and get the bank **FREE.**

**EXTRA!** If you hurry, we'll add, without cost, our big 1937 600-page novelty catalog, 3500 illustrations.

## THRIFT VAULT

**50c**

A 3 dial safe lock and Vault Bank. Just dial the three numbers and open the vault just like any safe. Big and roomy—it measures about 4x3 in. Swell to keep your money, jewelry, etc. in. Constructed of heavy metal with red and black trimmings. Full instructions with each bank. **VAULT BANK only 50c postpaid.**

**THRIFT VAULT** Similar in appearance to the above only made of welded steel, and slightly larger. Packed in a box, with complete directions for opening. Price, postpaid **$1.25**

## POP EYE KNOCKOUT BANK

Big, jumbo 3½x2½ x5" bank with regular hoking floor and two figures, Pop-Eye and his opponent. Each and every time a coin is inserted in the bank, the fight begins, and Pop-Eye delivers a terrific KO punch, flooring his opponent! Friends, neighbors and relatives put money in your bank just to see the fight. Lithographed in colors, with lock and key. **25c**

Price Postpaid

## BlankCartridgePistol

**50c**
**$1.00**

Two of the latest, newest models now out—**50c and $1.00.** Patterned after the latest type of revolver. Shoots 22 caliber blank cartridges obtainable everywhere. Handy protection against burglars, tramps and dogs. Fine for 4th of July, New Years, stage work, starting pistol, etc., etc.

**6 Shot Automatic** fluted steel 6-shot automatic blank pistol. Fires blanks only. Looks exactly like expensive automatic. **Shipped by express, not prepaid. Price $5.50. Uses special cartridges, 75c per 100.**

### *Looks Like A Real Revolver*

Strongly constructed with a flashy nickel finish. Has dip barrel that allows the cartridges to be loaded in a second. **Medium size, Large size $1.00. Blank Cartridges 50c per 100. Holster (Cowboy Type), 50c. SHIPPED BY EXPRESS, NOT PREPAID.**

## FUN LICENSES 10c

Large size, nicely printed with seal, suitable for framing. Hand one of these to your friend and he will never forget you! Your choice:

Doctor Certificate
Liar's License
Death Certificate
Birth Certificate
Arrest Warrant
College Diploma
Dog License
Divorce Certificate
One Arm Drivers Cer.
Kibitzer's Certificate
Gold Mine Stock Cer.
Air Pilots License
Bootlegger Diploma
Marriage Certificate
Liar & Grafter Cer.
Gossipers Certificate
Spanish Athletes Cer.
Gold Diggers' Cer.

**Price 10c each license. Any 3 for 25c.**

## CIGAR LIGHTERS

Four unique lighters at the low price of 15c each. Full sized pencil&lighter; key; Bullet and one which looks like a Cigarette—will fit into your cigarette case! Lights every time. Your choice ONLY

**15c**

Flints 3—10c

## Open Any Lock

Did you ever lose or forget your keys? Probably many times. Don't worry any more about lost keys for any keys, for that matter), as these master keys will open most ordinary door locks. Five different keys for various types of locks. Will save their cost if you only use them once, but you'll probably find them so handy that you'll always carry them.

**6 MASTER KEYS Price 25c**

## Good Luck Ring

Very striking, quaint and uncommon. Oxidized gun-metal finish; skull and crossbones design; two brilliant flashing imitation rubies or emeralds sparkle out of the eyes. Said to bring good luck to the wearer. **Only 25c.**

## Hands Up! Pistol Cigarette Case 25c

It looks like a deadly weapon, but it is merely a novel Cigarette Case. Better than the real thing in many an awkward encounter. Great fun "sticking up" your friends. They squirm and protest. Pull the trigger and the slide flies open, disclosing cigarettes. Price **25c**

## HOW TO TAP DANCE

**PRICE 25c**

Why envy the easy rhythm and fascinating grace of Step'n Fetchit, Fred Astaire etc. Tap dance in ONLY 6 HOURS by a new simplified course by Prof. Wilson. No special ability needed. Be smart! Everybody's tapping. The whole town is tapping. Beat out a tune with your feet.

**310 Illustrations**

Hostesses love it. Friends adore it. Besides, tap dancing is not only invigorating and entertaining but is also a faithful exercise for making the limbs supple and giving a "springy" feeling of fitness to the whole body. Promotes slimness nature's way—no pills, drugs or dieting. Readers say: "...wonderful benefit. Thank you for adding tap dancing to my accomplishments." Price 25c postpaid.

## Learn to DANCE

**OVER 101 ILLUSTRATIONS**

**LATEST STEPS.** Be popular. Good dancers are always admired—always popular guests. Partners welcome them eagerly. The newest, smartest steps without a teacher. Don't make excuses when the music starts. Get lots of fun from parties and dances.

If you want to become a perfect dancer, learn to dance at home this new easy way. **BOOK TELLS:** How to develop poise and control. Improve your dance steps, art of holding, how to walk to music, how to lead, latest fox trot steps, Natural and Reverse Turns, the Reverse Wave, The Quickstep swaying to music, Waltz, Backward changes, the Continental, The famous Kiss dance, the Manhattan, the Collegiate Rhumba, the Carlo, Charleston, etc. **Art of Dancing 25c**

## JU-JITSU DON'T BE BULLIED

**30c**

The Japanese art of self-defense. New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals fully with trips, throws, wrist locks, body holds, defense against revolvers, strangling, armlocks, scissors, splits, headlock, holding a man down, double knee throw, stick attack, defense against knife, one hand throat grip, defense against two assailants, stomach throw, secret thumb knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under all circumstances with nature's weapons. Fear no man, guns or knives! "Science of Ju Jitsu." Only 30c

## FRENCH PHOTO RING

A handsome ring, finished in imitation platinum & set with a large imitation diamond. In the shank of the ring is a small microscopic picture almost invisible to the naked eye, yet magnified to an almost incredible degree. Pictures of bathing girl beauties, French actresses, views of France, Panama Canal, Lord's Prayer (every word legible). Price Postpaid **25c**

## Ladies Panties Hanky

A perfect model of the most necessary lingerie garment worn by ladies, which, when folded and worn in the pocket, has the appearance of being a gentleman's handkerchief. A clever, funny joke. **Price 15c Postpaid.**

## SWEATER EMBLEMS

**BOYS!** Just what you've wanted—dandy, brilliant blue on orange **FELT EMBLEMS,** all ready to put on the front of your sweater or jacket or hang them in your "den." Easy to sew on and they look keen. Select the design you want: Fanny Dancer, Skull & Crossbones, Diving Girl, Lizard, Pirate, Good Luck Emblem, Football, Basketball, Baseball, Boy Scout or Lizard. **Price Each Postpaid 25c.**

## JAPANESE ROSE BUSHES

Perpetual Rose Bush seeds produce one of the most beautiful varieties of the rose ever developed. May be grown either indoors or outdoors and blooms the first year it is planted, and when three years old the bush is a mass of roses. Three Shades—white, pink and crimson. WE GUARANTEE IT TO PRODUCE SPLENDID FULL SIZE ROSES. Blooms regularly. **Packet, 10c**

## BOYS! BOYS! BOYS!

### THROW YOUR VOICE!

**Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.**

### THE WONDERFUL VENTRILO

**a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. Never fails. A complete book with full course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. Sent postpaid for only.....**

**10c**

## WONDERFUL X-RAY 10c

**GREAT CURIOSITY!** With it you can apparently see the bones in the fingers, lead in a pencil, even the flesh seems translucent. Always ready for use. **Only 10c ppd.**

## Rolmonica Automatic Mouth Organ

**$1.10**

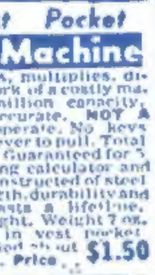
An automatic harmonica that plays a music roll just like a player piano. A whole brass band all in one—the biggest sensation in the musical world in the last few years. Just insert a roll and turn the handle while you blow. Nothing could be simpler. All kinds of melodies. There are hundreds of rolls to select from: **My Blue Heaven, Sidewalks of New York, Yankee Doodle, Over the Waves, My Wild Irish Rose, Merry Widow Waltz, Rose Marie, Old Man River, Twelfth Street Rag, Alexander's Rag Time Band, Hinky Dinky Parlez Voo, Make Believe, La Paloma, Turkey in Straw, Not Time in the Old Town Tonight, Wabash Moon, Waltz You Saved for Me, Lazy Bones, I Saw Stars, Home on the Range.** Each extra roll, 30c. Rolmonica with 1 roll **$1.10**

## New Vest Pocket Adding Machine

Adds, subtracts, multiplies, divides. Does work of a costly machine. Ten million capacity. Simple and accurate. **NOT A TOY!** Easy to operate. No keys to punch, no lever to pull. Total always visible. Guaranteed for 5 years. Lightning calculator and time saver. Constructed of steel ensuring strength, durability and reliability. Lasts a lifetime. Compact and light. Weight 7 oz. Will fit right in vest pocket and can be carried about without inconvenience. 3x6½in. Price **$1.50**

## ELECTRITE PENCIL

**Writes in Gold on Any Article**




Electrite Pencil writes in gold, silver, red, yellow, purple, green, blue, etc., on leather, wood, paper, bakelite, cellophane, silk, rubber, etc., etc. Put your name, monogram or initials in gold or any other color on your car, wallet, golf clubs, fountain pen, stationery, etc. Print and decorate anything. Live-wire boys and girls can earn extra cash easily by doing this for other people. Every time you print a name or monogram on an article you can easily get 25c for it, yet it costs almost nothing except few seconds time! Easy to use. Just plug in el. ectric light socket and the pencil is ready to write. **ELECTRITE PENCIL,** complete with supplies. ONLY..... **$1.25**

## Sensational Photo Ring

Your picture or your friend's picture slips neatly under top frame, making photo ring that is surprisingly smart looking. Smartest, classiest ring out. Same ring sells for $1.25 in New York. Beautiful silver appearance with heavy set, chased mounting. **PHOTO RING. Price .. 35c**

**Photo Tie Holder, Silver Finish, Price.. 35c**
**Photo Pendant Fob, Silver or Gold Fin.. 35c**
**Chain Photo (identification) Bracelet, Silver or Gold Finish, Price Postpaid 50c**

## WHOOPEE CUSHION

Whoopee Cushion is made of rubber. Inflated like a balloon, and then placed on a chair, couch, seat, etc. When the victim unsuspectingly sits upon the cushion, it gives forth noises that can be better imagined than described. Price **25c**

## ADDRESS ALL ORDERS FOR GOODS ON THIS PAGE TO

# JOHNSON SMITH & CO.

## DEPARTMENT 359 DETROIT, MICHIGAN

**3c** brings you our big, jumbo catalog of amazing novelties from all over the world! ★Joke Goods ★ Time Savers ★ Unusual Books ★ Puzzles ★ Magic ★ Fireworks ★ Cameras ★ Games ★Curious Seeds ★ Live Animals ★ Radios ★ Jewelry, etc. Things you never knew existed! *Deluxe edition with permanent cloth binding* **25c**

**RADIO & TELEVISION BOOK. How to build experimental sets, etc. Complete construction diagrams, information, etc. 10c**